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In(con)clusion: Exploring the Possibilities of an Amicable Relationship  
Between Feminism and Postmodernism

by

Miranda Ringma



A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research  
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

Department of Philosophy

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring 1996



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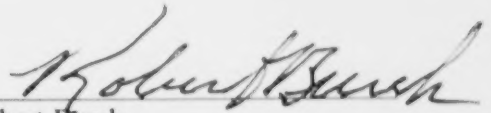
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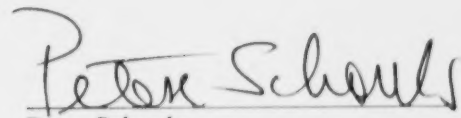
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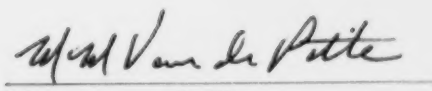
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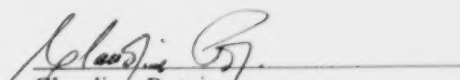
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Robert Burch

  
Peter Schouls

  
Margaret van de Pitte

December 15, 1995

  
Claudine Potvin

*for my dad*

*who, still now, continually forces me to realize that things aren't always as black and white as we might like them to be.*

*for my mom*

*who, still now, insists that sometimes, for sanity's sake, black and white are absolutely necessary.*

### **Abstract**

This thesis focusses on how different aspects of feminism and postmodernism, as anti-Enlightenment critiques, do or do not contribute to the possibility of a productive relationship between the two. The following topics are examined: definition; (mis)representation and identity; totalization and essentialism; and exploring the "abyss". The question of definition(s) addresses feminist and postmodernist aversions to traditional, restrictive definitions. The issue of (mis)representation and identity is important as it relates to subject-(de)construction and the possibility for political mobilization. Issues concerning totalization and essentialism and the manner in which this debate is conceived, affects feminists and postmodernists in various manners. "Exploring the Abyss" examines the possibilities for feminists in light of the "new spaces" opened up by postmodernists. The exploration of these areas is crucial to any consideration of the possibility of an amicable relationship between feminism and postmodernism. Whether or not decision on these matters is also crucial, is another matter.

### **Acknowledgements**

There are a number of people whose help, in various manners and matters, has been invaluable to me as I trekked through the process of writing this thesis.

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*Have you any notion how many books are written about women in the course of one year? Have you any notion how many are written by men? Are you aware that you are, perhaps, the most discussed animal in the universe?...How shall I ever find the grains of truth embedded in this mass of paper?*

- Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*

### **Introduction**

Grains of truth may or may not abound, but consensus about the viability of collective feminist and postmodernist projects does not. Many feminists and many postmodernists would not even consider the possibility of embarking upon collective projects. Postmodernists tend to have little use for feminist 'identity politics' and the feminist agenda as a totalizing framework. In turn, feminists tend to have grave reservations about the indeterminacy and insistence on radical contingency of the postmodernists. Furthermore, the difficulty, if not impossibility, of characterizing and explicating both feminism and postmodernism as homogenous or cohesive programs must also be considered for the varieties of feminism(s) and the different postmodernism(s) perpetuate the debate(s).

Despite the apparent differences between and within the two projects, both feminists and postmodernists tend to be interested in articulating radically new perspectives; perspectives which (re)contextualize the person and contest existing processes of legitimation and representation. In light of these sorts of issues and questions, I will explore the conditions for the possibility of an amicable relationship between feminism and postmodernism. This exploration will focus how different aspects of each perspective do or do not contribute to the possibility of a productive relationship between the two. In order to decide whether or not collective feminist-

postmodernist projects are, indeed, viable, the quagmire of (dis)agreements between and within the perspectives must be examined. However, before I explain the paths this examination will negotiate, the scene must be set.

### **Setting the Scene**

Both feminism and postmodernism share similar concerns about received Western theoretical positions and their implications. Feminists and postmodernists, for a variety of reasons, seek to displace problematic modernist structures understood in terms of Enlightenment rationality. They critique many characteristics of this rationality: its tendency toward "meta-narratives", its (problematic) totalizing schemas of representation, its foundationalism, and the prevalence of binary oppositions within this schema. They also question the sorts of beliefs that come from these characteristics of modernism, in particular, a belief in the stable, unified "self" (i.e. the autonomous, rational man) and a certain understanding of history and "progress". Both feminists and postmodernists have also sought to develop new paradigms of social criticism which do not rely on traditional philosophical underpinnings (their successes, of course, can be debated).

Postmodernists and feminists both seek to explore, deconstruct and cope with the Enlightenment and modernist "legacies". For feminists, the modernist conceptual schema is often understood to be problematic because it is thoroughly informed by

patriarchy<sup>1</sup> while, for postmodernists, the whole conceptual schema and the assumptions it depends upon, are problematic. Both approaches, in varying and sometimes oppositional manners, as Hekman puts it, "...present a truly radical critique of the Enlightenment legacy of modernism. No other approaches on the contemporary intellectual scene offer a means of displacing and transforming the masculinist epistemology of modernity. This fact alone creates a bond between the two approaches" (Hekman, 189). It is my contention that both postmodernism and feminism radically contest existing (problematic) socio-political structures and challenge the very limits of prevailing conceptions of rationality. The exploration of how these two approaches attempt to deal with Enlightenment "thinking" and its problematic conceptual schemas will, at minimum, illuminate some of the tensions and points of agreement between the two perspectives. Our examination of feminism and postmodernism, and an investigation into their (possible) relationship, can best be understood with their critique of Enlightenment thinking clearly in the foreground.

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<sup>1</sup> As our investigation proceeds, it will become evident that some feminists (i.e. liberal or Marxist feminists) do not believe that the *whole* modernist conceptual schema is patriarchal, while others do. This, indeed, is part of the postmodernist feminist's argument. Usually, however, there is at least some degree of agreement on the fact that, at least historically, the modern (Western) world has primarily been run by, conceptualized by and formulated by men (often for the benefit of men). Hence, it is agreed that, in some senses at least, the modernist epistemology can be understood as a masculinist epistemology.

## Anti-Enlightenment Critiques

The origins of feminism are firmly rooted in Enlightenment thinking<sup>2</sup>. Characteristically, such thinking includes the following beliefs: coherent, stable self, that philosophy can provide an objective, reliable, universal foundation for all knowledge; that truth is unchanging and independent of the knowing subject, a realist/correspondence theory of language, a rationalist and teleological philosophy of history; an optimistic and rationalist philosophy of human nature and scientific progress (Flax, 1990a, 29ff, 1990b, 41-42). These characteristics are motivated by (and symptomatic of) the over-arching Enlightenment belief in the unlimited progress of "mankind". Generally speaking, by "Enlightenment thinking" I am referring to, as the *Encyclopedia of Philosophy* puts it, "...an optimistic, this-worldly belief in the power of human beings, brought up rationally from infancy on as nature meant them to be, to achieve steady and unlimited progress toward material comfort and spiritual happiness for all men [sic] on this earth". This Enlightenment emancipatory pulse can, in some ways, be understood as the life-line of modernism.

The ethical and political implications of Enlightenment thinking are also criticized. While, on the surface, "steady and unlimited progress" sounds like a laudatory ideal having to do with human emancipation, there are a number of possible paths of critique. The first, which might be understood as the postmodernist critique, suggests that the Enlightenment promise of human emancipation is "ill-founded" or illusionary for there are no grounds upon which to premise such a promise for

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<sup>2</sup> Johnson notes that the critical consciousness of Enlightenment thinking is a precondition of the historical appearance of feminism (Johnson, 113).

emancipation. The second critique, which might be that of some feminists, suggests that while such a goal sounds promising, it has not yet been realized. Finally, it might also be debated that the Enlightenment picture of human emancipation is not the only one that might be considered (i.e. human emancipation might be "grounded" in some other manner)<sup>3</sup>.

Interestingly, how one understands or defines "Enlightenment thinking" is itself indicative of the degree to which one embraces certain tenets of the Enlightenment. If one believes that there is no neutral description of Enlightenment thinking, one immediately takes a stand against Enlightenment ideals. Conversely, if one claims that the above description of Enlightenment thinking is biased, for example, one becomes complicit with the Enlightenment ideal or belief that philosophy can provide objective, reliable and rational foundations for all knowledge (i.e. that there are definable true and false answers).

Regardless of what mode of unification modernist processes of legitimation use, postmodernists attempt to show how the foundationalism of modernism is "ill-founded". While postmodernist challenges defy brief summary, "...one aspect [of postmodernism] stands out: the rejection of the attempt to find an absolute grounding for knowledge" (Hekman, 4). Yet rather than arguing abstractly against the foundationalist presumption of modernism, the postmodern strategy involves deconstructing particular texts, showing how the foundationalist claims of the text depend upon suppressing dimensions of the text's own textual or discursive production.

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<sup>3</sup> This issue will be explored again shortly.

By bringing these dimensions explicitly into play, the postmodernist strategy exhibits how the text subverts itself. In particular, the postmodernist emphasis tends to be on discrediting, deconstructing and twisting the dichotomies an Enlightenment perspective depends upon (i.e. rational/irrational; private/public; subject/object; etc.)<sup>4</sup>. Such constructions, postmodernists contend, require a framework which assumes that the whole is determinable. If one might speak more generally about postmodernism as a project or movement, granting that any such attempt by postmodernists would belie their strong aversion to the same<sup>5</sup>, it might be said that postmodernists are against grand, totalizing schemas which are intended to comprehend Reality as a unified whole or, as Lyotard puts it, postmodernism involves an "incredulity toward meta-narratives" (Lyotard, xxiv).

Generally speaking, feminism still depends upon and is implicated in Enlightenment assumptions<sup>6</sup>. While some feminists insist that feminism requires these

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<sup>4</sup> We will examine the term "deconstruction" and the postmodernist aversion to oppositional thinking in the section on definition.

<sup>5</sup> This difficulty is articulated well by Hutcheon: "In writing about these postmodernist contradictions, then, I clearly would not want to fall into the trap of suggesting any "transcendental identity"...or essence for postmodernism. I see it as an ongoing cultural process or activity, and I think that what we need, more than a fixed and fixing definition, is a "poetics", an open, ever-changing theoretical structure by which to order both our cultural knowledge and our critical procedures" (Hutcheon, 1993, 254).

<sup>6</sup> I am referring particularly but not exclusively to the liberal roots of feminism. Earlier liberal feminists like Mary Wollstencroft, Harriet Taylor Mill and then those like Betty Friedan and, more currently, liberal feminists like Susan Moler Okin most obviously embrace Enlightenment ideals. Clearly these are just a few, but it seems, that (at least) some feminists are still rooted in the Enlightenment ideals of human reason and hope for continual social progress. Liberal feminists tend to focus on the claim that an unjust society prevents women from developing their human reason or potential and therefore, feminists must work on enacting equality of opportunity in the marketplace, the academy

Enlightenment ideals, other feminists now argue that feminism can survive without them<sup>7</sup>. Johnson argues that feminists must recognize and cling to these ideals:

The Enlightenment project which looks to the constitution of the emancipated personality as humanity's main historical task must be embraced and reformulated by feminism. Without the critical assumption of this project, feminism is...left with no perspective from which a present, repressively constructed femininity could be challenged (Johnson, 115).

Johnson's contention is that without the "critical assumption" of the Enlightenment project, which I assume here is some sort of dependence on Enlightenment epistemology, feminism has no "ground" from which to critique existing models. Interestingly, as we shall see, this is precisely one of the feminist arguments against postmodernism in general.

However, feminists such as Hekman argue that it is precisely those "critical assumptions" of the Enlightenment perspective which continue to haunt feminists.

Hekman develops a clear and poignant argument about how a dependence on Enlightenment epistemology (an epistemology that rests on the distinctions between the subject and object of knowledge, the rational and the irrational, and, ultimately, on

---

and the home. Ebert explains that "The Enlightenment and liberal feminist argument for a "natural" equality between men and women depends on the belief in an inherent human nature based on a rational consciousness immanent in men and women alike. In other words, the "self-hood" of women is the same as, that is, "identical" with, their immanent human nature, specifically, their rational consciousness (which is the same as men's)" (Ebert, 889). Included in this debate on human nature and liberal philosophy as it comes into contact with feminism is the question of whether or not liberal feminists can or should retain some kind of public / private distinction. For a fuller discussion on this issue see Feminism and Equality edited by Anne Phillips.

<sup>7</sup> This argument is sometimes raised as a question about the possibility of a "postmodern feminism".

a distinction between the male and the female) cannot, because of its inherent gendered bias, hope to realize the liberation that many liberal feminists think it can<sup>8</sup>. Without the dissolution of the dualisms of Enlightenment epistemology, she suggests, one side of the dichotomy (i.e. the male) will inevitably be privileged over the other (female). Furthermore, Hekman notes that feminist attempts to construct a "feminist" epistemology place "...the virtues of 'female nature', nurturing, relatedness and community" in opposition to "...the 'male' values of domination, rationality, and abstraction" (Hekman, 5). Attempts to privilege the 'female' side of the dichotomies will, inevitably, be "self-defeating" because "the rationality of male thought is still the standard by which the virtues of 'female nature' are judged" (Hekman, 6). Hekman argues that Enlightenment epistemology is problematic because it is dependent on "ill-founded" dichotomies, dichotomies which embody an intrinsic male bias.

The dissolution of Enlightenment dichotomies also necessitates giving up the "emancipatory impulses" which follow and depend upon these dichotomies. Piecemeal attempts to cling to some parts of a unified Enlightenment perspective while ignoring others, according to some feminists, will not suffice. As Geraldine Finn insists,

You cannot "doctor" these theories with respect to women and at the same time save the theory. The philosophical system does not survive the doctoring. The exclusion or denigration of women is integral to the system and to give equal recognition to women destroys the system (Finn, 151)<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> For a complete articulation of this argument, see Hekman's Gender and Knowledge, especially the first two chapters.

<sup>9</sup> Hekman also quotes Finn on this issue.

Feminists such as Finn argue that the dissolution of Enlightenment dichotomies necessitates the rejection of the whole system of beliefs precisely because the whole system depends upon these male-biased dichotomies. Enlightenment emancipatory "impulses" cannot be redeemed without re-invoking these hierarchical dichotomies<sup>10</sup>.

Many feminists, and I would include myself here, claim that a return to Enlightenment ideals, even re-envisioned ones, will cause more problems than it solves. Even a strong reconceptualization of the (male) Enlightenment thinker who celebrates (his) freedom to trust in the power of (his own) reason would seem to over-emphasize the primacy of reason and the nature of freedom. It strikes me that feminists would not want to endorse such a strong (albeit implicit) faith in the (unlimited) progress of "mankind". And furthermore, feminists, it seems, would not want to cling to the basic tenets and tools of Enlightenment thinking because they seem to over-emphasize problematic assumptions about the nature of personhood<sup>11</sup>, and because, as we noted earlier, they are so embedded in, and defined by, patriarchal structures<sup>12</sup>.

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<sup>10</sup> This is not to make the suggestion that other "emancipatory" impulses (however that might be worked out) would, necessarily, also be excluded from the realm of feminist possibilities. However, it seems to me that any (other) use of the term "emancipation" must clearly mark out how and why this term no longer carries the problematic connotations (baggage) of the Enlightenment ideal.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Held contrasts the paradigm of "economic man" with the paradigm of a mothering person (see "Non-Contractual Society: A Feminist View") and Code contrasts the "autonomous man" with a model of "second persons" (see "Second Persons") while Ann Ferguson examines the limitations of the "Rational Maximizer" as derivative of Locke and Jefferson (see "A Feminist Aspect Theory of the Self").

<sup>12</sup> The development of these ideas began with a reading course on feminist philosophy taken with Dr. Peter Schouls in the fall of 1994.

While many positive changes for women have been propelled by the drive for autonomy and the hopes for a free and rational social life, especially by liberal and "first wave feminists", many feminists argue that such ideals may be the wrong place from which to begin theoretical discussion. The desire to embrace Enlightenment aims may be motivated by the recognition that women reside in actual, historical locations and are presently being oppressed by the structures in which they find themselves (structures which insist on the importance of autonomy and rational action). Lorraine Code, in her discussion of Enlightenment perspectives, recognizes that a rejection of "autonomy-centred" approaches,

...may initially seem to be ill-conceived, from a feminist perspective, in view of the fact that it has been a primary feminist pre-occupation to urge women to strive for autonomy, understood both as freedom from patriarchal oppression, and as freedom to realize their own capacities and aspiration (Code, 1987, 358, emphasis hers).

While some feminists would not want to abandon the potentially liberating power of using Enlightenment and, subsequently, modernist critical tools, they must (simultaneously) recognize that they are also involved in a critique of Enlightenment and modernist assumptions<sup>13</sup>. And, ironically, while some feminists want to abandon Enlightenment and modernist tools, they must (simultaneously) recognize that any claim about the oppression of women is already to be implicated in some mode of (modernist) philosophical discourse. How feminists understand the terms in which the oppression of women is presently recognized and defined, whether they approve or not, relies on Enlightenment rationality.

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<sup>13</sup> We will return to this discussion in the section on totalization and essentialism.

### **The Possibility of an Amicable Relationship**

Just as postmodernism and feminism cross many disciplinary and institutional boundaries, this exploration of the conditions for the possibility of an amicable 'relationship' between feminism and postmodernism will cross "traditional" philosophical boundaries: epistemology, metaphysics, ontology and political philosophy are but a few of the areas to be touched upon. This exploration of the relationship between feminism and postmodernism will also include why I will not raise the question about the possibility of a feminist postmodernism or a postmodern feminism; to do so would be to "set up" the thesis according to traditional, abstract binary oppositions in which, inevitably, one term will be privileged over the other. Accordingly, I will not juxtapose postmodernism and feminism in order to establish definable points of agreement/identification and disagreement/antagonism between the two projects. Rather, I will investigate some of the intersections between the two; not to provide The Road Map or The Tourist's Guide Book to these two contemporary 'schools' of thought (as if each were a definitive school) but to explore the possibilities of (at least contingent) consensus between the two. This said, because it makes no sense to affirm, *a priori*, a totalized incommensurability, I will inevitably define, generalize and discuss concepts from my own context-dependent perspective--a perspective which assumes, as does the required thesis format, that (at least some degree of) communication is possible.

In considering this topic thematically, I shall examine the following themes: definition, (mis)representation and identity, essentialism and totalization, and exploring

the "abyss" (new spaces). I realize that any one of these areas could easily be a thesis topic on its own, however, I am interested in exploring how (the combination of) these elements do or do not contribute to the possibility of collective feminist and postmodernist projects. I also recognize that to speak about postmodernism and feminism in a 'general' manner rather than focussing on specific people may be seen to be a blatant disregard for the nature and content of the project. Indeed, it is precisely this sort of generalizing which modernist and misogynist thinking have (problematically) done for centuries. Therefore, each thematic section will discuss in-depth specific persons and texts<sup>14</sup>.

I am not a neutral observer nor a disinterested party and, as such, this thesis will be an exploration rather than an exposition--I will not attempt to tell The Story about feminism and postmodernism. It is my initial assumption that both perspectives, in a variety of ways, fruitfully and radically contest existing social and political structures, even though the focus and methodology of their critiques differ dramatically. It is these issues which I will explore--with an emphasis on raising some of the interesting questions in a manner which may encourage open-ended dialogue about the possibility of collective postmodernist and feminist projects.

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<sup>14</sup> In the interest of brevity and containing the discussion to a manageable size, my focus will be, almost exclusively, on the relevant English (rather than French or other) texts.

### **Definition**

In light of the methodological comments made previously, the problems of definition will have to be addressed. Obviously, how one defines both feminism and postmodernism will affect subsequent lines of inquiry. Neither feminism nor postmodernism are homogenous or definitive perspectives, both include a variety of perspectives and range over many disciplines and areas of interest: defining them will not be a simple task.

Mary Poovey rather simplistically states that "there are as many deconstructions as there are feminisms" (Poovey, 51). It seems to me that an equivalent parallel cannot be drawn so quickly. However, more accurately, Poovey goes on to note that discussing "...the relationship between "deconstruction" and "feminism" is therefore to beg--or defer--the question of definition" (Poovey, 51). Deconstructionists attempt to endlessly defer definition(s) because definitions entail the sort of closure which deconstructionists seek to subvert. Endlessly deferred or not, discussing definition and (definitions of) feminism and postmodernism requires further attention.

Webster's dictionary defines "definition" as "...stating the precise meaning of / to be what characterizes (something) / to formulate or describe precisely / to mark the limits of..."<sup>15</sup>. Interestingly, if definition is understood as an 'imposing of limits' or of drawing lines which include some elements and exclude others, than this is just the sort of thing that feminism and postmodernism find problematic. For various reasons,

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<sup>15</sup> The New Lexicon Webster's Encyclopedic Dictionary of the English Language, Canadian edition, 1988.

feminists and postmodernists find fault with traditional conceptions (and perhaps pretensions) about the possibility of being able to mark out absolute, precise definitions and, more specifically, with how traditional definitions of, for example, "woman", "history", "progress", and the "self" are problematic.

Although definitions are frequently invoked, the nature of defining or definition itself is rarely questioned. An analysis of definition must include questions about what a definition is, what standards it should satisfy and what kind of knowledge it purports to convey<sup>16</sup>. There are generally seen to be three manners in which to understand definition: linguistic or lexical; prescriptive or stipulative; and essentialist or ostensive. The linguistic or lexical model suggests that definition has to do with the words of a language or their meaning as defined in a dictionary: definitions are reports of word usage. The prescriptive or stipulative model suggests that definitions state conditions for reaching an agreement and that definitions hope to clear up ambiguities and settle signification with imperative sentences rather than declarative sentences (essentialist). The essentialist or ostensive model suggests that definitions are directly demonstrative (logical) and that they convey precise and certain meanings. Those who view definition in an essentialist or ostensive manner, "claim that definitions are statements and that they make assertions that can be pronounced true or false"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 2, also makes reference to these types of questions.

<sup>17</sup> *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 2.

However, common uses of the term "definition" are not necessarily intended to "fit" into any particular category or manner of understanding definition itself. Invoking a "definition" is often done in a "general" manner, "simply" attempting to use it for purposes of decision with the hopes of achieving clarity. Our investigation of "definition" will attempt to address the challenges of feminists and postmodernists regarding the "standards" of definition (who defines?) and the kinds of knowledge definitions purport to convey (in what context?). For these reasons, our primary focus will be on the essentialist/ostensive and prescriptive/stipulative models of definitions, but the lexical/linguistic models of definition are also relevant when one considers deconstructionist strategies.

### **Definition and Feminism**

There are many different feminisms, ranging the political spectrum and crossing many disciplines. Liberal, radical, socialist, lesbian separatism, materialist and cultural feminism are only a few. If one grants that feminism is "...not in any simple way, one thing" (Elam, 1994, 4), one is still left with the question of what it, in fact, *is*. The term "feminism" has become a "loaded" term with various connotations and varying degrees of political and cultural forcefulness. Most would probably agree with Jardine that "As a generic term, 'feminism' is semantically tortuous and conceptually hazardous" (Jardine, 15). We can also probably agree on some kind of "motherhood" statement about what feminism is generally about. Feminism, Jardine notes, can be "...generally understood as a 'movement from the point of view of, by and for women'

(Jardine, 15). But such a broad sweeping definition lacks substantial rigor and depth. If one considers the manner in which the term "feminist" is typically used, such a grandiose definition has other problems: it can also be attributed to those women who are not feminists (i.e. "REAL" women); it fails to address the idea that there is a problem with the state of women that must be re-dressed; and it fails to include some kind of reference to the "oppression" or possible "liberation" of women. In other words, it fails to take into account the stipulative or prescriptive elements of feminism. Furthermore, such a broad definition creates a pretentious over-arching, summative schema which neutralizes the oppression of specific women:

...it covers substantial ground and becomes particularly dangerous across borders...any generic description of either French or American feminisms would immediately homogenize, colonialize, and neutralize the specificities of struggles that are often of quite epic proportions (Jardine, 15).

For these reasons, a broad, over-arching definition of feminism is problematic.

Liberal feminism, often understood as the roots of feminism or the "first-wave" of feminism, embraces 'an autonomous female subject' which is to be understood as a transfer of women from, what Delmar calls, "the state of subjection to subjecthood" (Delmar, 25). This drive is sometimes labelled feminist "emancipationism" where women are to be regarded as equal to men (i.e. right of women to work, to express themselves, to vote). Elizabeth Cady Stanton states this ideal (and implicit *raison d'être*) of liberal feminism well:

The strongest reason why we ask for woman a voice in the government under which she lives; in the religion she is asked to believe; equality in social life, where she is the chief factor; a place in the trades and professions, where she may earn her bread, is because of her birthright to self-sovereignty; because, as an individual, she must rely on herself... (Cady Stanton, 270)

The definition of woman and, subsequently, the program of feminism for liberal feminists relies on the liberal ideal of self-sufficiency, individual rights and equal treatment (with men).

Radical feminism, to investigate another feminist perspective, seeks to articulate a female culture which is distinct from a male culture. Sometimes radical feminism takes the form of feminist "separatism" which involves women who seek to live apart and differently than men. Lesbianism is likely one of the most obvious forms which feminist separatism can take, but there are others. Feminist separatism radically claims that our culture is so completely permeated by patriarchy and sexism that women's only recourse is separatism. Frye puts it thus:

When women separate (withdraw, break out, regroup, transcend, shove aside, step outside, migrate, say no), we are simultaneously controlling access and defining. We are doubly insubordinate, since neither of these is permitted. And access and definition are fundamental ingredients in the alchemy of power, so we are doubly, and radically, insubordinate (Frye, 294).

Feminist separatism seeks to alter the balance of patriarchal power in favour of women by withholding and withdrawing their energy and resources from existing structures.

Still other feminists embrace socialist or Marxist perspectives. These feminists combine (in various manners) the problems of sexism (and the oppression of women) with the problems of classicism (and the oppression of the proletariat). As Hartmann notes,

The struggle against capital and patriarchy cannot be successful if the study and practice of the issues of feminism is abandoned. A struggle aimed only at capitalist relations of oppression will fail, since their underlying supports in patriarchal relations of oppression will be over-looked. And the analysis of patriarchy is essential to a definition of the kind of socialism useful to women (Hartmann, 354).

According to socialist feminists, the overthrow of patriarchy and capitalism must coincide in order to enact the liberation of women.

These sketches of how various feminists understand the role and, at least implicit, (prescriptive) definition of feminism are quick and rough. It must be remembered that there are many varieties of liberal, socialist, separatist, and radical feminisms not included or accounted for here. Clearly, a socialist feminist response will look very different if understood within the Mexican context or within the economic and political sphere of the United Kingdom. Furthermore, it must also be remembered that the roots of these feminist perspectives reside in the work of bourgeois, white women. Other feminist perspectives, perspectives from women of colour, from lesbians, from women residing in non-Western countries etc. are also (finally) beginning to be heard. The plurality and heterogeneity of feminism(s) cannot be mitigated or ignored.

There is yet another approach to feminism and definition which deserves our attention. These feminists argue that the whole concept of definition in general, and defining women, in particular, is problematic and, as such, must be abandoned. Diane Elam strongly claims that

Definitions threaten to function like final answers which erase the fact that there were ever any questions asked in the first place; their status becomes unshakable, almost natural, and rarely if ever interrogated...I would even go so far as to argue that not only is the search for a universally agreed upon definition of "feminism" and "deconstruction" a waste of time, it is also highly undesirable (Elam, 1994, 4).

In a similar vein, Flax argues that we cannot pursue neat integration or synthesis, for such attempts are neither possible nor desirable:

Integration or synthesis would necessarily negate or deny irreducible differences between and among these discourses. To search for synthesis would presume that a theoretical jump over "the Rhodes" of our transitional and fragmented culture is possible through the exercise of a "pure" ahistoric reason (Flax, 1990a, 42)<sup>18</sup>.

Attempts for totalizing definitions and synthesis, these theorists argue, assume the possibility of an ahistoric reason, ignore the fragmented, transitional nature of culture and people and, furthermore, close the door on questions about what it means to be a "woman". Definitions, whether understood under the prescriptive or ostensive model, often fail to account for the context in which such a definition might operate.

How, then, does one go about exploring the problematics of definition? How does one determine categories and points of reference in order to admit some degree of commensurability? Elam continues that, at least within her own work, she wants

...to keep the act of naming and defining as a site of contestation, for the question that should continually be posed is: who gets to name what?...I want...to embrace a plurality of changing definitions...there is no single feminism or deconstruction to define, only feminisms and deconstructions...One of the problems...is taking into account the plurality within and between feminism and deconstruction, while at the same time acknowledging that these terms do determine realms, categories, or spaces with a certain coherence or rigor (Elam, 1994, 5).

Elam's argument, it seems, presumes some degree of coherence and intelligibility is possible and yet she gives us very little to embrace except the 'plurality of definition within and between'.

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<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that while Flax argues against synthesis and integration, she also uses rather analytic and foundationalist language. As she later states: "Nonetheless it is possible to *identify underlying goals*, purposes, and constituting objects in feminist theorizing. A *fundamental goal* of feminist theorists is to *analyze* gender: how gender is constituted and experienced and how we think--or--equally important--do not think about it" (Flax, 1990a, 20, emphasis mine).

Interestingly, all these approaches to defining (or not defining) women seem to be entangled (with)in the crux of feminism itself. There remains a question that has plagued feminism since its establishment. If feminism is understood as an attempt to free women from constricting, male-imposed limits and problematic definitions of the (ideal) 'woman', how is one to explain and understand the discrepancy between these imposed definitions or limits of the "ideal" woman and the lives and experiences of "actual" women? The exploration of what seems to be an internal tension, possibly a contradiction, within feminism itself may illuminate why the difficulty of definition continues and, most likely, will continue to haunt feminists.

Let us say, at least for the moment, that feminism is involved in freeing women from, and revolting against, patriarchy. Immediately one is beset with a tension which, as Harding puts it, is a tension residing within the word "women": "Feminist thought is forced to "speak as" and on behalf of the very notion it criticizes and tries to dismantle--women. In the contradictory nature of this project lies both its greatest challenge and a source of its great creativity" (Harding, 1993, 59)<sup>19</sup>. On the one hand, feminists must expose and dismantle oppressive patriarchal structures and, on the other, they must define better ways of theorizing, researching and organizing social life. Without the second part of the commitment, feminists may implicitly endorse

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<sup>19</sup> Alcoff makes a similar point when she states: "For many contemporary feminist theorists, the concept of woman is a problem. It is a problem of primary significance because the concept of woman is the central concept for feminist theory and yet it is a concept that is impossible to formulate precisely for feminists" (Alcoff, 1988, 405).

alternate masculinist models<sup>20</sup>. If feminists want to avoid female absorption into another male-sexist model, they must develop prescriptive accounts which are not defined by, nor dependent upon the continuance of, patriarchal structures<sup>21</sup>.

While feminists combat restrictive definitions of women, they simultaneously construct others. Alcoff states that the dilemma "...facing feminist theorists today is that our very self-definition is grounded in a concept that we must deconstruct and de-essentialize in all of its aspects. Man has said that woman can be defined, delineated, captured--understood, explained, and diagnosed" (Alcoff, 1988, 406)<sup>22</sup>. While feminists must continually define and redefine their role in combatting patriarchy, and while feminists believe strongly in what they do, their greatest hope is that they will become obsolete. Any definition of "woman" and "feminism" itself, is formulated and understood in response to, and because of, patriarchy--the very problem it hopes to eliminate<sup>23</sup>. The paradox of feminism is that its own existence, and the need to

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<sup>20</sup> Plumwood also makes this point: "...to repudiate the old tradition...and put nothing in its place, usually amounts to implicitly endorsing an alternate *masculine* model...and to implicitly endorsing also female absorption into that model" (Plumwood, 214, emphasis hers).

<sup>21</sup> The development of these ideas began with a reading course on feminist philosophy taken with Dr. Peter Schouls in the fall of 1994.

<sup>22</sup> Spivak's explanation of negotiation is also helpful to understanding what can be understood as a dilemma of feminism: "...all I mean by negotiation here is that one tries to change something that one is obliged to inhabit, since one is not working from the outside. In order to keep one's effectiveness, one must also preserve those structures--not cut them down completely. And that, as far as I can understand, is negotiation" (Spivak, 72).

<sup>23</sup> Rabine puts this point slightly differently: "This paradox applies to feminists...because we must not only write but also act within the metaphysical logic of patriarchy in order to dismantle it...It also requires complicity with the very patriarchal

formulate its own definition(s), signals its failure.

In light of these dilemmas<sup>24</sup>, feminists either completely abandon attempts at 'definition' or (problematically) define "women" and, subsequently, feminism, in a far too restrictive manner<sup>25</sup>. We have seen at least a glimpse of the varying definitions of feminism, from feminists themselves. What has become evident is that contemporary feminism cannot be understood as homogenous. A history of feminism will illustrate that, indeed, overall, there is no unified consensus on what it means to be a "woman", and subsequently, what the role of feminism should be<sup>26</sup>. Delmar claims that "the fragmentation of contemporary feminism bears ample witness to the impossibility of constructing modern feminism as a simple unity in the present or of arriving at a shared feminist definition of feminism...it now makes more sense to speak of a plurality of feminisms than of one" (Delmar, 9). The variety of feminist approaches, historically and presently, cannot be adequately subsumed under one definable category. Hence, the definition(s) of "women" and feminism(s) and the various

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structures that must be dismantled for equality to be even possible" (Rabine, 28).

<sup>24</sup> Mitchell and Oakley put it well: "If woman cannot be fixed as an identity beyond the biological female, neither can feminism have a unified definition...In both cases the ground changed to quicksand beneath our feet" (Mitchell & Oakley, 3).

<sup>25</sup> I am alluding here to the problems of "essentialism" which will be explored later in the section on totalization and essentialism. Alcoff explains the two different directions feminists tend to go slightly differently: "...the cultural feminist response to Simone de Beauvoir's question, "Are there women?" is to answer yes and to define women by their activities and attributes in the present culture. The post-structuralist response is to answer no and attack the category and the concept of woman through problematizing subjectivity" (Alcoff, 1988, 407).

<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Cott's Grounding of Modern Feminism.

feminist approaches to definition itself, will have to be understood in the plural. In this respect at least, the difficulties of defining feminism(s) are similar to the difficulties of defining postmodernism(s). Coping with the plurality of (postmodern) definitions is the difficulty which now must be addressed.

### **Definition and Postmodernism**

Most discussions of postmodernism begin with a caveat about the diversity and lack of unity within and throughout postmodern writings. This discussion will not differ in that respect. Best and Kellner clearly and pointedly inform us that "there is no unified postmodern theory, or even a coherent set of positions. Rather, one is struck by the diversities between theories often lumped together as 'postmodern' and the plurality--often conflictual of postmodern positions" (Best & Kellner, 2). Natoli and Hutcheon suggest that "...postmodernism has provoked precious little agreement on anything from the reasons for its existence to its definition, let alone on the evaluation of its effects" (Natoli & Hutcheon, xi). Beyond the plurality and diversity of those theorists or writers who might be considered "postmodern", another inherent difficulty of defining postmodernism exists.

Within postmodernism there lies, at minimum, a general dislike or abhorrence of definition itself. The postmodernist aversions to foundationalism, binary and oppositional logics, universalization and totalization, understood within our discussion to this point and to be explored later, illuminates why the terms in which we (traditionally) understand "definition" become elusive and fragmentary. The

paradoxical nature of postmodernism is its trump card from the outset:

...one of the reasons for this disagreement [about the definition of postmodernism] no doubt lies in the paradoxical nature of the beast itself: in its ironic self-undermining critical stance and in its commitment to doubleness-- that is, to the juxtaposition and equal weighing of such seeming contraries as the self-reflexive and the historically grounded, the inward-direction of form and the outward-direction of politics... (Natoli & Hutcheon, xi)<sup>27</sup>.

Defining postmodernism is, in some senses, to defy the project: it avoids being "pinned down", it avoids and interrupts the oppositional logic required for definitions, it embraces contradiction, it avoids coherence, and questions unified discourse. The publication date of a deconstructionist dictionary would, most likely, be endlessly deferred.

### **Methodological Choices**

At this point I am left with (at least) two methodological options: I can investigate or at least list, in a more modernist manner, the oppositionally set-up differences between postmodernism and modernism, or I can, like Elam, Spivak and others just continually avert and defer the terms and definitions of postmodernism, simply allowing them to become more or less apparent.

If we decide to compare and contrast postmodernism with modernism, a debate as to when and if modernism became postmodernism ensues. While it is often conceded that the beginning of modernism can be dated back to Descartes' *ego cogito*

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<sup>27</sup> We will explore the postmodern commitment to doubleness shortly.

*ergo sum*<sup>28</sup>, the conclusion of modernism is yet in dispute. Theorists such as Best and Kellner note that the social and political radicalism of the 1960s, while it might not have accomplished the revolution its proponents sought, seemed to have spawned, or was as at least one in a series of events which indicated a break with the previous (modern) society. This, along with the explosion of the media, computers and new technologies, a restructuring of capitalism, and other political shifts and upheavals, Best and Kellner note, is, at least in part, why the "contemporary postmodern controversies can therefore be explained in part by an ongoing and intense series of crises concerned with the breaking up of the 'modern' modes of social organization and the advent of a new, as yet barely charted, 'postmodern' terrain" (Best & Kellner, ix). In light of the "crises" of modernist "meta-narratives"<sup>29</sup>, the new postmodern "terrain" can, characteristically, often be seen espousing what Bertens calls "radical epistemological and ontological doubt" (Bertens, 45). While some see a "break" between modernist and postmodernist "tendencies", others argue that the modernist era has not yet run its full course.

Another difficulty with understanding postmodernism as opposed to modernism is that "setting up" the debate into modernist / postmodernist is to employ modernist logic of yet another either / or dichotomy<sup>30</sup> and ignores the way in which

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<sup>28</sup> For example, Hekman states that "Descartes' *ego cogito ergo sum* placed the certainty that is the goal of the modern episteme firmly within man himself" (Hekman, 62).

<sup>29</sup> Lyotard suggests that postmodernism involves "an incredulity towards meta-narratives" (Lyotard, xxiv).

<sup>30</sup> Natoli & Hutcheon make a similar point in *A Postmodern Reader*, p. 1.

postmodernism would like us to consider the "narrative" we have come to "know" as history<sup>31</sup>. Indeed, Lyotard's "simplified" definition of postmodernism as an "incredulity towards meta-narratives" illustrates why such schematic oppositions are problematic for postmodernists. However, breaking the "rules" of the postmodern game may serve to illuminate some of its strategies.

Ihab Hassan presents a table of the (oppositional) differences between the modernist "tendency" and the postmodernist "tendency" (Hassan, 281). Hassan suggests that his table brings us closer to a "historical and theoretical definition" of postmodernism. However, Hassan also recognizes that "...the dichotomies this table represents remain insecure, equivocal. For differences shift, defer, even collapse; concepts in any one vertical column are not all equivalent; and inversions and exceptions, in both modernism and postmodernism, abound" (Hassan, 281). While Hassan's efforts may be seen to be a blatant disregard for the postmodernist aversion to strict oppositions and dichotomies<sup>32</sup>, it might be helpful to use his table for the purposes of our discussion:

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<sup>31</sup> Elam states that "Although postmodernism does involve a consideration of what modernism might be, it cannot be seen as defining itself in simple opposition to modernism" (Elam, 1992, 9). Elam sees postmodernism as radically calling our conception of history and historical "periodicity" into question (Elam, 1992, 10) and asking us to "rethink narrative and its relationship to the legitimization of historical knowledge" (Elam, 1992, 12). Precisely because postmodernism asks us to investigate how we claim to "know" history, Elam argues that we cannot set it in simple opposition to modernism.

<sup>32</sup> This idea will be explored shortly.

Modernism

Form (conjuncture/closed)  
Purpose  
Design  
Hierarchy  
Mastery/Logos  
Art Object/Finished Work  
Distance  
Creation/Totalization  
Synthesis  
Presence  
Centring  
Signified  
Paranoia  
Origin/Cause  
Metaphysics  
Determinacy  
Transcendence

Postmodernism

Antiform (disjunctive, open)  
Play  
Chance  
Anarchy  
Exhaustion / Silence  
Process/Performance/Happening  
Participation  
Decreation / Deconstruction  
Antithesis  
Absence  
Dispersal  
Signifier  
Schizophrenia  
Difference-Différance/Trace  
Irony  
Indeterminacy  
Immanence

(Hassan, 281-282, incomplete)

While the list is cryptic and the terms unexplained, the table may, nevertheless, provide a hint as to what the tendencies of the postmodernists are (generally) seen to be. One of the obvious problems, even for those who do not embrace postmodernist ideas, is that historical periods cannot be understood in a vacuum; they should always be understood within certain contexts and by certain people in specific situations. It must be recognized that even the modern / postmodern categories are constructed<sup>33</sup>.

Caveats aside, there is one opposition on Hassan's list which may help us explore the "nature", if I am permitted that word, of postmodernism. Hassan has it listed as the modernist tendency for creation / totalization as opposed to the

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<sup>33</sup> As Cornell puts it, "But historical periods are not just deciphered, they are always in part constructed. As we have seen in the debates over what constitutes the "modern" and the "postmodern," these categories are also normatively constructed" (Cornell, 9).

postmodernist tendency for decreation / deconstruction. I noted earlier that breaking the "rules" of the postmodern game may serve to illuminate some of its strategies. One of those strategies can be understood as "deconstruction" which attempts to show how meta-narratives (in a broad sense) and, more specifically, the rigid dichotomies and hierarchies "meta-narratives" depend upon, can be shown to undermine themselves. I now turn to the term "deconstruction" and the deconstructionist aversion to "set up" oppositions like just listed, with an eye for explaining some of the postmodernists' aversion to restrictive definitions.

### **Deconstruction**

In one sense deconstruction might be understood as simply dismantling a certain text, argument or theoretical project by carefully exposing the author's presuppositions or by analyzing the underlying premises of the argument and exposing inconsistencies of some sort. By presuppositions, I mean (extra-logical) principles which underly philosophical positions and systems<sup>34</sup> and which are, in this sense, to be understood as pre-theoretical. Presuppositions, as thus formulated, can be either implicitly or explicitly underlying philosophical discourse, and as such, they function to channel and direct certain lines of argument and inquiry while ignoring others. Some might argue that the philosophical enterprise is precisely about (rationally) ridding one of particular biases or presuppositions. However, I would argue that such a position, itself, is motivated by a presupposition about the autonomy of philosophical

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<sup>34</sup> See Schouls, p. 189.

or theoretical discourse (either through reason, science or some other method)<sup>35</sup>. In this sense, then, deconstruction could be understood as being involved in exploring the presuppositions of historically and socially situated beings, thus dissecting the arguments and discourse to illuminate and better understand the position in question. This understanding of deconstruction, however, is not that new or radical.

A more "radical" sense of the term "deconstruction" can be attributed to the practice(s) of a certain school of postmodern literary critics and philosophers. Jacques Derrida and his followers are said to "deconstructionists" who are involved in

...analyzing the operations of difference in texts, the ways in which meanings are made to work. The method consists of two related steps: the reversal and displacement of binary oppositions. This double process reveals the interdependence of seemingly dichotomous terms and their meanings (Scott, 37).

Deconstructionists' analysis of how "meanings are made to work" involves recognizing the implicit dichotomies within texts (dichotomies which always seem to be hierarchical such that one part of the dichotomy is valued over the other) and then revalorizing the traditionally devalued concept over the traditionally valued concept (i.e. women over men; or margin over centre). However, deconstructionists wish to go further than reversing traditional oppositions, they wish to disempower and

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<sup>35</sup> Clearly, much more could be said on this issue. It strikes me that accepting that there are presuppositions underlying any philosophical discourse is a much better way of understanding human nature and the nature of philosophical discourse. However, I am consciously exposing my own presuppositions on this issue to illustrate how it will, necessarily, affect the line of inquiry which one wishes to explore.

deabsolutize oppositional or dichotomous thinking<sup>36</sup>. Poovey states:

The project of deconstruction, then, is not to reverse binary oppositions but to problematize the very idea of opposition and the notion of identity upon which it depends. Deconstruction therefore undermines identity, truth, being as such; it substitutes endless deferral or play for these essences (Poovey, 52).

Deconstructionists seek not to reinforce oppositional thinking by re-valorizing one or the other side of a dichotomy but, rather, to play with the dichotomy and defer<sup>37</sup> the meanings of the terms in order to, ultimately, subvert that dichotomy.

Deconstructionists also maintain that the historical particularity of subjects and the plurality of perspectives requires that we give up searching for unified, normative standards upon which to base over-arching critiques. As Johnson puts the position,

...to recognize such historical character is to acknowledge that any attempt at radical transcendence of the norms and perspectives given by historical circumstance is implausible...the standardisation of any particular perspective or value is to be definitely avoided (Johnson, 112).

For deconstructionists, because subjects are historically and socially embedded and have a variety of perspectives, unitary (and universalistic) thinking must be discredited.

It is at this point that one can begin to understand the deconstructionist (as well as the postmodernist) attempt to undermine the presumption that definitions are closed and decidable. Scott claims that a positive definition "...rests on the negation or

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<sup>36</sup> It must be noted that deconstructionists are not the first to raise objections to problematic dichotomies. Feminists have argued against the reductionism of dichotomous thinking for many years. See, for example, Code's *What Can She Know?*, pp. 212 ff., 244 ff.

<sup>37</sup> "Deferral" and "play" are often used interchangeably by deconstructionists to illustrate the "fact" that there is only play and that the meanings of the terms cannot be fixed or determined.

repression of something represented as antithetical to it" (Scott, 37). Therefore, any unitary concept (which will necessarily include positive definitions) contains "repressed or negated material" (Scott, 37). Postmodernists suggest that unified discourse, which is constantly involved in making definitions and prescribing methods of approach, creates false oppositions and dichotomies, and, therefore, ultimately excludes or ignores some other relevant concept or idea. Gasché puts it another way: the text does not "...interconnect homogenous threads into one totality...it links heterogenous forces, which constantly tend to annul the text's precarious unity, a unity constituted by an essential incompleteness" (Gasché, 290). Deconstructionists unravel texts in order to illustrate the impossibility of their unity. For deconstructionists, definitions can only be understood as lexical or linguistic: the definition of terms is a function of their differences from other terms (or signs) in a sign system and that within the system there are infinite substitutions or play (not one logical or ostensive trajectory). Our discussion of deconstructionist strategy has illustrated one instance of how postmodernists, in order to recognize the endless plurality of perspectives, tend to want to undermine pretentious claims to truth and unitary thinking (as is often assumed in prescriptive or ostensive definitional models) in favour of undecidability, endless deferral or play.

However, there is yet another difficulty with any attempt to define postmodernism. One can sense a tension, albeit a rather oppositionally "set up" one, if postmodernists are often seen to be involved in 'deconstruction' while 'definition' is seen to be a process of 'construction'. Apparently, any desire for coherence and

simplistic clarity is problematic. In light of the postmodern insistence on contingency and indeterminacy, on deconstruction and deferral, one must ask if precise definition generally, and a definition of postmodernism specifically, is necessary or even possible.

One might feel that one is left at an impasse: either one throws up one's hands and claims that definition itself is too restrictive and, ultimately impossible. Or, one makes grandiose, perhaps simplistic oppositionally "set-up" pictures (like Hassan does) in order to understand what exactly the "paradoxical beast" of postmodernism, as Best and Kellner put it, in fact is. Perhaps the dilemma of postmodernist definition should not be "set-up" in such an oppositional, modernist manner. How one deals with this problem should at least recognize that definition, itself, will not be a simple matter of reading off of the most rational explanation. Any definition will be telling: it will illustrate a context-dependent perspective.

Perhaps, as Cornell suggests, the postmodern should be understood as an "...allegory which expresses the desire for a beyond to the current definition of Enlightenment ideals" (Cornell, 11). Understanding the postmodern as an allegory is hardly precise, but it is telling. Understanding that the postmodern includes a desire to go beyond the current definition of Enlightenment ideals is at least helpful. It is not a "final" answer, but it is not a completely pluralistic, groundless or relativistic answer either.

### **Feminism, Postmodernism and Definition**

We have seen the "dilemma of definition" as it is borne out in feminist and postmodernist discussions: both perspectives seek to displace (absolutist) truth enunciating and adjudicating models. As anti-Enlightenment critiques, both postmodernism and feminism offer interesting perspectives and commentary on the problems associated with (restrictive) definitions. While feminists cannot avoid defining and re-defining "feminism" and "woman" within problematic patriarchal structures, these structures are precisely those which necessitate the existence of feminism. The paradox of feminism is that any attempt to free women from constricting, male-imposed limits and problematic definitions of the (ideal) 'woman' simply confirms the discrepancy and difference between these imposed definitions or limits and the lives and experiences of actual women.

Attempts at defining postmodernism are equally problematic. One either completely ignores the content of the postmodernist project and allows for simplistically ("rationally") devised definitions of postmodernism as it stands in opposition to modernism, or, on the other hand, one is left with little ground from which to discern or claim any definition whatsoever. Postmodernist difficulties with "definition" are similar to feminist ones in that the very existence of postmodernism embraces a similar paradox. Rabine notes a similarity between feminist and deconstructionist strategy: "...every position that contests or challenges our sociosymbolic order must do so incompletely because it must be formulated in the very language and logic of the order it wishes to overturn" (Rabine, 27).

Postmodernists are forced to use modernist logic (at least some of the time) in order to state their claim against modernist assumptions.

In both cases, one is left navigating one's way through the two extremes. The paradox of feminism is that in fighting oppressive patriarchal structures it is required to be complicit (at least in part) with those very structures. The paradox of postmodernism is that in fighting modernist structures it is required to be complicit (at least in part) with those very structures. Forced complicity marks the discourse of both feminism and postmodernism, as does the plurality and fluidity of their respective "positions". Failure to fight this complicity (with existing structures and logic) signals complicit agreement with those very structures and systems. Elam notes that "once you think you know what "feminism" and "deconstruction" are, then their political and ethical work is done" (Elam, 1994, 4). If definitions of postmodernism and feminism were obvious and decidable, their suggestions for change would have been incorporated into the "generally accepted" conceptual schema (there would be no more debate on these matters) and their critiques would be yesterday's concerns. However, it seems that, as of yet, both perspectives cannot be summatively characterized in the past tense.

In response to the paradoxes of definition, another opposition has been constructed: either one insists on complete pluralism, with very few answers, or one makes a definitive statement about the "nature" of (women and) feminism and postmodernism. On the one hand, it would be oxymoronic to claim complete incommensurability and, hence, one must make some generalizations and assertions.

Yet, on the other, one would be completely unattuned to the nature of the projects if one simply disregarded both feminist and postmodernist warnings and aversions to restrictive, "rational" and oppositionally "set-up" definitions. Navigating between these two extremes is typical of any discussion on the matter; navigating around (and avoiding) the establishment of these extremes is possibly more fruitful.

Throughout this discussion one thing became clearer: the complexity of the 'problem of definition' is a problem which is, in fact, characteristic and perhaps even 'definitive' of, both perspectives. Perhaps shared postmodernist and feminist concerns and predicaments regarding the problematics of definition can serve to establish open lines of, at least tentative, communication.

### (Mis)representation and Identity

The issue of identity is important as it relates to subject-construction and the possibility for political mobilization. Both feminists and postmodernists oppose the modernist constructions of the stable, coherent, (male) subject who has a privileged standpoint. I will explore these critiques of the Cartesian subject / object dichotomy and how these criticisms give rise to new articulations of what it now means, if anything, to be a "knowing subject".

The modern episteme can, at least in part, be understood as being defined and informed by the Cartesian dichotomy between the subject and the object<sup>38</sup>. Within the modernist picture the subject is the "self-conscious guarantor of all knowledge" (Hekman, 62). Both feminists and postmodernists question the privilege of the (white, bourgeois, male) "subject" within this framework. Postmodernists seek to displace the Cartesian subject completely, while, as we shall see, feminists disagree as to what should be done. What feminists do not dispute is the problematic nature of the subject/object dichotomy which has traditionally defined men as the subjects and women as objects of knowledge. Feminists have spent a great deal of energy combatting patriarchal ideas and practices which promote the objectification of women<sup>39</sup>.

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<sup>38</sup> See Hekman, pp. 60 ff.

<sup>39</sup> Hekman makes a similar point (Hekman, 73). Elam puts it slightly differently: "Feminism has illustrated time and again that the exploitation of women has come about through their continued commodification as sex objects and domestic slaves. Whether Debbie does Dallas or the dishes, the result is the same: objectification in the eyes of patriarchy" (Elam, 1994, 29).

### **The De-Centred Subject**

Postmodernists attempt to "de-centre" the subject<sup>40</sup>. Within the postmodernist picture the subject no longer has metaphysical priority, in fact, there is no longer 'a subject' that is reflexively secure in the Cartesian sense. The abandonment of a rational, unified subject is usually accompanied by embracing some sort of socially and linguistically de-centred, fragmented subject. As Hekman suggests, postmodernists replace the "...transcendental subject of Enlightenment thought with a subject that is historically situated and not, as Descartes pre-supposed, the sole guarantor of truth" (Hekman, 63). The subject is no longer the centre or locus of knowledge acquisition.

The replacement of the modernist subject with a radically contingent, "de-centred" subject also undermines the modernist conception of epistemology. Hekman argues that this is done in two ways. First of all, she suggests, postmodernists assert that knowledge is not acquired through the abstraction of an autonomous subject from a separate object, but, rather, that knowledge (of subjects and objects) is "...constituted collectively through forms of discourse" (Hekman, 63)<sup>41</sup>. Secondly, postmodernists define knowledge as plural and heterogenous (truths not Truth) and thereby challenge

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<sup>40</sup> Bertens articulates this aspect of postmodernism well: "The postmodern self is no longer a coherent entity that has the power to impose (admittedly subjective) order upon its environment. It has become decentred, to repeat Holland's phrase. The radical indeterminacy of Postmodernism has entered the individual ego and has drastically affected its former (supposed) stability. Identity has become as uncertain as everything else" (Bertens, 65).

<sup>41</sup> This idea will be examined again shortly.

the modernist notion that there is one true method of knowledge acquisition (Hekman, 63). The replacement of modernist epistemology also displaces the subject/object dichotomy (i.e. the "subject's" knowledge of the "object" and "his" goal of achieving objective knowledge no longer works as a paradigm for knowledge acquisition).

The postmodernist critique of the Cartesian subject is also a critique of modernist metaphysics and ontology. As Bertens suggests, "...in practically all recent concepts of postmodernism the matter of ontological uncertainty is absolutely central. It is the awareness of the absence of centres, of privileged languages, higher discourses..." (Bertens, 64). Similarly, Hekman notes that postmodernists radically critique the ontology of truth which claims that "man is the source of all truth; he sets himself up as the one who constitutes himself" (Hekman, 65) and they critique the metaphysics of subjects and objects suggesting that "man should not have metaphysical priority (privileged standpoint) over objects" (Hekman, 65). The postmodern subject is no longer on centre-stage; the postmodern subject is not the adjudicator or creator of all Truth and is not to be privileged over objects.

The binary opposition of the subject/object, according to postmodernists, must be dissolved and deconstructed. Such a dichotomy must be dehierarchized and dismantled by "showing that the seeming priority and identity of the primary term is, in fact, a fraud" (Ebert, 893). The deconstructionist emphasis on language and textuality, for example, indicates a shift of focus away from the author (subject), the author's intention, and finding the "true" (static or objective) meaning of the text to the process of reading as a "...different species of production" (Hekman, 67). Meaning,

for postmodernists, is not articulated or discoverable by a stable subject or a stable text, but is, rather, "...created in an interactional process between reader and text" (Bertens, 64). The postmodernist suggestion that meaning is created as the result of interaction between a reader and a text also blurs the distinctions between subject and object.

While postmodernists do not (necessarily) intend to abolish the subject, they do intend to situate it. They hope to reconsider subjectivity in conjunction with the historical, the concrete and the specific. This new subjectivity is often understood, as I explored earlier, in terms of "interaction" of "self" with others or, more accurately, "self" with "text". As Bertens explains, "...the former notion of a stable identity has given way...to a new concept of identity, a concept based on interaction" (Bertens, 65). Postmodernists hope to point out the limits of (modernist) conceptions of the determinate, centred, stable self in order to understand the self as indeterminate, as constituted rather than as constituting<sup>42</sup>.

Hence, for metaphysical, ontological and epistemological reasons,

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<sup>42</sup> This will be further explored shortly. However, it may be helpful to note that, according to Spivak, deconstruction teaches us to look at the limits of how we centre the subject, rather than on (completely) insisting upon "de-centring" the subject: "What deconstruction looks at is the limits of this centring, and points at the fact that these boundaries of the centring of the subject are indeterminate and that the subject (being always centred) is obliged to describe them as determinate" (Spivak, 104). What Spivak suggests is that deconstructionists recognize the difficulty of "de-centring" the subject and continue to point out the limits of that centring: deconstructionists, according to Spivak, insist that articulations of subject-positions are not as determinate or fixed as modernist conceptions of subjectivity might suggest. However, it is not, she contends, that subjects do not "centre" themselves, but rather that there should be no "absolutist priority given to one centred subjectivity over another".

postmodernists insist on de-centring the (identifiable, stable) subject and showing that *how* "subjects" know cannot be divorced from *what* they know. In other words, postmodernists decry a correspondence theory of knowledge, a picture which insists on a definable subject as separate from an "objective" reality "out there".

Basically, if I am permitted that word, postmodernists hope to displace the Archimedean point of the modernist era. Postmodernists suggest that there is no human God's-eye-view from which to assert and judge among competing "truth" claims. There is no Truth, but many truths. There is no human yardstick or viewpoint from which to ascertain what is The Truth; such an effort is futile. The subject cannot be deemed to be centred for this improperly valorizes one side of a problematic division between the subject and object; a dichotomy which must be dissolved and deconstructed. In its place, postmodernists urge a recognition of a different species of production, one which does not give priority to the subject and one which recognizes that the processes of discursive production are fragmented, fluid and contextual rather than stable or static.

### **Feminist Approaches to Subjectivity**

For various metaphysical and epistemological reasons, feminists give a variety of responses to questions of subjectivity. While feminists do not (generally) disagree about the problems associated with the stable, autonomous Cartesian subject, they do disagree on how to proceed. Feminists (such as Code and Baier, among others) have attempted to articulate new conceptions of personhood which recognize the contextual,

inter-dependent and historical nature of the person<sup>43</sup>. While other feminists (such as Alcoff and de Lauretis) want to reconstitute the positive aspects of the Cartesian subject while ridding it of its negative aspects<sup>44</sup>. And other feminists (such as Hekman and Elam) agree with postmodernists, arguing that the whole subject / object dichotomy must be displaced<sup>45</sup>.

Feminists argue against modernist conceptions of subjectivity because, within that framework, women are often seen as the "objects" of knowledge, while men are seen as the subjects. However, some feminists also feel that their goal is to attain the subject position, a position, they feel, will ensure equality with men. When women attain the position of subject it is often seen as a victory for feminism. However,

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<sup>43</sup> Both Code (see her "Second Persons" and *What Can She Know?*) and Baier (see "Cartesian Persons" in Baier's *Postures of the Mind: Essays on Mind and Morals*) suggest that persons are essentially "second persons" which embodies "Thinking in terms of relations and historical experiences (both one's own and those one's community) as constitutive of what each person is as a continually evolving self...each life is a nexus of many other life-lines and experiences, partially separate and partially interrelated and interdependent" (Code, "Second Persons", 366). The "second persons" concept recognizes that people are dependent on other people for nurturance, care, respect and affirmation in order to establish and maintain their continuing sense of "self".

<sup>44</sup> Hekman makes a similar point, pp. 80 and 93. See de Lauretis' "Eccentric Subjects" and Alcoff's "Cultural Feminism vs. Post-Structuralism". Flax summarizes their position well: "Although feminist theorists seem to undermine essential properties of the Enlightenment self, they are also unable to abandon it fully" (Flax, 1990, 230). Ring also thinks that the postmodernist position "surrenders too much" (20) and leaves "an unnerving absence of structure" (19) and "no reliable perspective at all" (19). Therefore, she continues, "I think it may be possible to salvage the concepts, at minimum, of subjectivity and objectivity" (Ring, 20).

<sup>45</sup> Hekman forcefully argues that unless the subject / object dichotomy that has characterized Western thought and social structures is displaced, these structures will continue to define women as inferior (Hekman, 93). We will explore Elam's arguments on this matter in the section on "Exploring the Abyss".

Elam cautions feminists against celebrating the attainment of the position of subject:

...we shouldn't put on our party clothes too quickly...The achievement of a definitive or calculable subjectivity is...not solely liberatory...indeed we realize that women become subjects only when they conform to specified and calculable representations of themselves as subjects (Elam, 1994, 29).

As the postmodernists warn, attaining the position of subject also comes with its hazards. The position of subject within a modernist framework requires conformity to a representation of a certain kind of subject<sup>46</sup>.

By assuming the (traditional) subject position of Western thought, women assume the subject position of men. It is worth quoting Owen at length:

Among those prohibited from Western representation, whose representations are denied all legitimacy, are women. Excluded from representation by its very structure, they return within it as a figure for--a representation of--the unrepresentable (Nature, Truth, the Sublime, etc.). This prohibition bears primarily on woman as the subject, and rarely as the object of representation, for there is certainly no shortage of images of women...In order to speak, to represent herself, a woman assumes a masculine position; perhaps this is why femininity is frequently associated with masquerade, with false representation, with simulation and seduction...women's...exteriority of Western representation exposes its limits (Owens, 59)

The limits of the Western (Enlightenment) schema of representation are exposed by the exterior position this schema attributes to women. This might be understood as the crossroads at which feminism and postmodernism meet. Feminists, it seems, must remember that assuming a subject position within an Enlightenment epistemology is assuming a very limited representation of what it means to be a knowing "subject". An examination of different feminist approaches to identity will better illuminate some

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<sup>46</sup> Embracing the modernist subject not only requires conformity to a certain kind of subject, it also keeps the dichotomy between the subject and object intact. The difficulties with this will be explored shortly.

of the tensions within the feminist movement on the issue of subjectivity.

One immediate feminist response to the postmodern critique of subjectivity is what can be called the "Why now?" question. Echoes of this question can be found in many feminist discussions of postmodernism. Hartsock forcefully asks:

Why is it, exactly at the moment when so many of us who have been silenced begin to demand the right to name ourselves, to act as subjects rather than objects of history, that just then the concept of subjecthood becomes "problematic"? Just when we are forming our own theories about the world, uncertainty emerges about whether the world can be adequately theorized (Hartsock, 1987a, 196)<sup>47</sup>.

Hartsock's question is an important one because it signals the exasperation felt by some feminists who have made significant strides in formulating different feminist epistemologies and are now, in light of postmodernist concerns, forced to re-formulate and re-examine those efforts.

The "why now?" question is also important because it acknowledges the fact that women are finally feeling as if they are able to fill the position of "subject" (as opposed to the being the object) of knowledge. "Strange timing", Brodribb exclaims, "...the subject is now annulled by ungenerous and disingenuous white Western wizards while women's, Black and Third World liberation movements are claiming their voices" (Brodribb, xvii). The "why now" question is crucial because it asks the curious question of timing: it asks, as Brodribb puts it, whether or not postmodernism is another "male ruse" attempting to keep women from attaining the position of (privileged) subject.

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<sup>47</sup> See also Flax, 1990a, p. 220; Hekman, p. 155; and Brodribb's book *Nothing Mat(t)ers*.

Feminists such as Alcoff and de Lauretis hope to salvage parts of the modernist conception of subjectivity while discarding the problematic elements<sup>48</sup>. Both de Lauretis and Alcoff reject the postmodern articulation of subjectivity because, they contend, it does not allow for agency and the possibility of resistance. While Alcoff recognizes the dangers of "essentialist conceptions of the subject"<sup>49</sup> (Alcoff, 1988, 431), she wants to define a subjectivity that both has agency and is part of a discursive practice: "...it seems both possible and desirable to construe a gendered subjectivity in relation to concrete habits, practices, and discourses while at the same time recognizing the fluidity of these" (Alcoff, 1988, 431). Alcoff's subject would be both "nonessentialized and emergent from a historical experience" and yet would retain the political ability to take gender as an important point of departure: "gender is not natural, biological, universal, ahistorical, or essential and yet...gender is relevant because we are taking gender as a position from which to act politically" (Alcoff, 1988, 433). Similarly, Teresa de Lauretis explains that the

...subject of this feminist consciousness is...neither unified nor singly divided between positions of masculinity and femininity but multiply organized across positions on several axes of difference and across discourses and practices...and most significantly, it has agency (de Lauretis, 137).

Both Alcoff and de Lauretis hope to salvage the agency of the Cartesian subject while, at the same time, also articulate a version of the postmodernist constituted and de-

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<sup>48</sup> As we noted earlier, Johnson, too, hopes to re-formulate existing articulations of subjectivity: "The Enlightenment project which looks to the constitution of the emancipated personality as humanity's main historical task must be embraced and reformulated by feminism" (Johnson, 115).

<sup>49</sup> We will explore this idea in the next section on essentialism and totalization

centred subject.

Hekman argues that any attempts to fuse the Cartesian subject to elements of the constituted subject results "...in an unworkable epistemological eclecticism" (Hekman, 81). The subject who has agency, who constitutes a personal subjectivity, is precisely the autonomous, abstract, individualized subject that is the basis of the Cartesian subject. By attempting to take the "good" qualities (of agency, for example) of the Cartesian subject and affixing them to a constituted postmodern subject, these theorists assume a "...dichotomy between the constituting Cartesian subject who possesses agency and autonomy and the constituted subject that is wholly determined by social forces" (Hekman, 81). Postmodernists hope to displace this dichotomy by showing that the constituted subject *is* the subject that resists. Arguments against the epistemological eclecticism of feminists such as Alcoff and de Lauretis primarily "centre" around the idea that any philosophy of the subject has been (and will be) a vehicle for the oppression of women, rather than its opposite. For those feminists who argue against work of feminists such as Alcoff and de Lauretis, subjectivity (understood in the modernist sense) necessarily implies subjectivation<sup>50</sup>.

Claims about the construction of female identity (keeping in mind our discussion on definition) whether understood as constituting a 'self' that should be seen identical as the male 'self' or as differentiated from the male 'self' rely on similar approaches. Identifications of women established either as difference (radical, cultural or "gynocentric" feminism) or sameness (liberal feminism) to male identifications

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<sup>50</sup> Hekman notes that this claim derives from the work of Foucault (Hekman, 81).

"erases the differences within" (Ebert, 891) each specific category (i.e. race, class, sexual orientation)<sup>51</sup>. Ebert contends that "Both modes of feminism--those advocating equality and those claiming difference--are what I call "identitarian" feminism because of their essentialist commitment to identity" (Ebert, 891)<sup>52</sup>. She places this type of identitarian feminism next to what she terms a post-structuralist "differential" feminism which is concerned with "difference within". Thus no entity, she continues, "...whether an individual or the category of women, is an autonomous, self-contained, self-same identity; rather it is always different from itself, divided by its other" (Ebert, 892). Postmodernists dislike "difference between" because of its pretence to certainty and decidability (i.e. "A" is "A" when it is not "B") while "difference within" admits that categories are unstable and that there is no "mirror", no corresponding "out there" to be contrasted with relations of difference (i.e. there are only signifiers; no stable signified).

How feminists understand difference and how they stake their epistemological claims affects how they view the postmodernist approaches to subjectivity. Feminists who insist on differences (or sameness) between men and women still embrace an epistemology which relies on oppositional logic and stable, coherent categories.

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<sup>51</sup> Cornell and Thurschwell make a similar point: "...the gynocentric critique of universalist feminism is a critique of the identity category that (mistakenly) accepts this category for what it claims to be...but...understood properly, the stark choice between universality and absolute difference is a mis-representation of the interlocking interplay of sameness and difference. Furthermore, it is a false choice: the gynocentric response reinscribes itself in the same repressive logic of identity that it criticizes in universalist feminism" (Cornell and Thurschwell, 162).

<sup>52</sup> We will address the issue of essentialism in the next section.

Feminists who hope to abolish the modernist epistemology of the stable coherent subject argue for concepts such as "differences within" and view subjectivity as involving undecidability and instability rather than fixed, universal categories.

If the motivation of postmodernist arguments against false representation and pretences to transcendent subjectivity can be understood as "...attempting to expose the system of power that authorizes certain representations while blocking, prohibiting or invalidating others" (Owens, 59), then feminists and postmodernists share an agenda, albeit with different emphasis and points of departure. Shared concerns about the limits of (traditional) schemas of representation unite postmodernist and feminist programs. However, I am not advocating a simple identification between the two projects for, while it is evident that shared concerns may lead to some consensus, the political and theoretical agendas that follow from these concerns differ dramatically.

### **Politics and Identity**

Differences between postmodernism and feminism become quite apparent in the debate about whether or not communal political action (i.e. feminist political action) requires a grounded or foundationalistic notion of identity. Many feminists argue that throwing out the bath water, namely the subject, throws out the baby of the possibility of political action. The argument can be understood as an argument about the possibility of (feminist) identity politics. Elam summarizes the argument:

...political action is impossible without subjects acting collectively. Hence the argument that the deconstruction of the subject is a luxury that feminism cannot politically afford: no subject means no identity which means no identity

politics, which means no feminism (Elam, 1994, 72)<sup>53</sup>.

The unity and viability of the feminist movement has often been assumed to derive from (at least a) potential identity between women and that women share the same experiences<sup>54</sup>; experiences which transcend differences of race, class etc. These shared experiences, it is argued, enable unified resistance. Envisioning agency and the possibility for resistance without the (traditional) Cartesian constituting subject becomes a stumbling block for many feminists.

The basis of (feminist) identity politics assumes that women share common experiences and that these experiences can and should become the ground for political action. The difficulty with this assumption is that it too easily discounts the (actual) differences between women and too often encourages "...uniformity and conformity...so that difference among women is not just ignored but erased" (Elam, 1994, 72). Furthermore, the most obvious possible basis for shared experiences, namely female physiology and reproductive capabilities, is essentialistic and reductivistic. Assuming that every woman's oppression is identical, that patriarchy is one single system without multiple manifestations, or a general plea for commonality will create a feminism which will not account for difference and will ultimately oppress those who differ from the established identity of "woman"<sup>55</sup>.

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<sup>53</sup> The tenets of this argument can be seen in many feminist discussions. For example, Alcoff asks, "How can we ground a feminist politics that deconstructs the female subject? Nominalism threatens to wipe out feminism itself" (Alcoff, 1988, 419).

<sup>54</sup> See Delmar, p. 10.

<sup>55</sup> This discussion will be continued in the section on essentialism and totalization.

However, a destabilized identity and a de-centred subject radically shakes the foundations of feminist politics. Ebert asks the critical question facing feminists today: "The question for feminism is how can it build a transformative politics on a postmodern difference that throws out certainty and destabilizes identity" (Ebert, 892). If feminists are to recognize difference and embrace uncertainty and instability, they also require a new understanding of politics.

### **Postmodern Politics?**

It is important at this point to address the question of how one might understand postmodern politics. Spivak argues that politically, the deconstructionist insistence on de-centring the subject, in order to mark the limits of subjectivity, *simply* disallows fundamentalism<sup>56</sup> and totalitarianism:

Politically, *all this does* is not allow for fundamentalisms and totalitarianisms of various kinds, however seemingly benevolent. But it [deconstruction] *cannot be foundational*. If one wanted to found a political project on deconstruction, it would be something like wishy-washy pluralism on the one hand, or a kind of irresponsible hedonism on the other (Spivak, 104, emphasis mine).

Deconstruction as a political program would, as Spivak suggests, probably look something like "wishy-washy pluralism". However, one might debate Spivak's claim that "all" deconstruction does is "simply" disallow fundamentalisms. Deconstruction, if permitted to be taken seriously, would seem to entail more about what a possible political program can and cannot look like than it might like to admit. While there is

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<sup>56</sup> I use the term "fundamentalism" here, as Spivak does, to suggest the absolutization of a perspective.

often strong denial of any (absolute) postmodern political commitments, it must be recognized that this, itself, is a political commitment. Benhabib asks us to put postmodern political eclecticism in perspective:

...contemporary philosophy, dazzled by the dissolution of the episteme of representation, is anxious to cite American pragmatism, French Nietzscheanism, British conservatism, and Heideggerian wisdom all in one breath. It is likely that we will have to live with this polytheism, and dazzling "play of surfaces" ...for some time to come. Nor is it unwelcome that the frozen fronts of philosophy are becoming so fluid again. Only it is necessary that we think the epistemic alternatives created by the present also to their moral and political ends (Benhabib, 1984, 126).

Benhabib's insistence that we consider the political and moral implications of embracing a postmodern philosophy are to the point especially if we consider the sparse attention such discussions receive within postmodern philosophy<sup>57</sup>.

Postmodernists tend to suggest that their critique of modernism is (tellingly) deconstructive rather than constructive. However, I would argue that any effort to deconstruct, implicitly or explicitly, enables or leaves room for other (constructive) approaches. Even if it is only granted that all postmodernists do is allow room for other perspectives, they are implicitly suggesting that any (political) program would be better than the existing one(s).

Postmodernist attention to particularity, to pluralism and pragmatism, however those perspectives are worked out, are "positions". They are not, as Richard Rorty

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<sup>57</sup> For example, Richard Rorty insists that critique of (modernist) ideology is "...at best, mopping-up, rather than path-breaking. It is parasitic on prophecy rather than a substitute for it...Philosophy is not...a source of tools for path-breaking political work" (Rorty, 100). The issue of postmodern politics will arise again in the section on "Exploring the Abyss".

would have us believe, "neutral" to the issues of gender politics (Rorty, 101).

Postmodernists, at least on an individual level, have political agendas; agendas which must not be ignored or shelved in the corner as "irrelevant" or "neutral".

It should be noted that while postmodernists generally remain rather quiet on the subject of politics, there are some efforts to articulate the political implications of a postmodernist position. William Corlett, for example, seeks to articulate a "community without unity" in his book of the same title. He argues that even though postmodernist writing challenges uniformity by "searching for cracks in the foundations of political and social thinking" (Corlett, 3), this does not necessarily suggest that postmodernism does not lead to some form(s) of politics. Corlett attempts to illustrate how Derrida's "extravagant manoeuvres can be used to displace the individual / collective tension"<sup>58</sup>. Corlett hopes to use deconstructionist strategies in order to "study mutual service without domination" (Corlett, 12). Such a displacement, Corlett contends, might enact a "community without unity" which is consistent with the postmodernist emphasis on multiple differences (Corlett, 4). The displacement of the individual / collective tension radically alters our preconceptions about (the nature of) politics but it does seem that postmodernist arguments can be fleshed out to enable the possibility for provisional and tentative political commitments.

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<sup>58</sup> Corlett suggests that "An extravagant perspective uses reason and order in a provisional way while refusing to permit any form to become entrenched or to provide reassurance. This perspective is made possible by confessing that...madness resides even in the order-giving text" (Corlett, 12-13). Corlett's note about Derrida's extravagant manoeuvres are likely referring to his strategies of deconstruction and play.

It must also be noted that our respective decisions about the politics of the postmodern are, themselves, based upon, at least to an extent, other (political) positions. Elam suggests that we must "admit that there is a politics to our definition of the political" (Elam, 1992, 22). While we seek to discover what the politics of the postmodern involve we must also be keenly aware that such discussions, themselves, are (politically) motivated by other presuppositions<sup>59</sup>.

According to "postmodern feminists", the uncertainty of the de-centred subject, while it might disallow absolutist and completely unified political aims, does not negate the possibility for political action. Uncertainty itself, "...is neither an absolute obstacle to action nor a theoretical bar to political praxis" (Elam, 1994, 31). Deconstruction would urge us, Elam states, to consider that political subjects are provisional rather than definitive or absolute<sup>60</sup>. Elam argues for a politics of the undecidable, as a "realm of continual negotiation, as a matter of negotiation in the absence of any accounting procedure" (Elam, 1994, 81). The politics of the undecidable, according to Elam, would refuse to "close down the question of difference or account for it by merely balancing competing claims to rights" (Elam, 1994, 81). Any "accounting procedure" (which one might understand as "absolutist" formulas for adjudicating claims to certain political rights), as Elam puts it, would hamper productive negotiations about questions of difference(s).

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<sup>59</sup> Our discussion on postmodern politics will continue in the final section of this thesis.

<sup>60</sup> Elam, 1994, p. 78.

However, other feminists claim that indeterminacy and provisionality disenables political action rather than its opposite<sup>61</sup>. In response, Elam argues that such undecidability allows us to

...imagine other political spaces--spaces of political otherness...politics is an encounter with difference, the attempt to handle differences...A just politics must seek to handle those differences, to respect them, without implying that what is other can be made identical by means of that handling (Elam, 1994, 84-5).

The politics of the undecidable is not about relativism, argues Elam, but is rather about "refusing to ground decisions in universal laws...the deconstructive motivation (we could call it agency) to make judgments and take actions begins with the displacement of the assurance of a self-present subject" (Elam, 1994, 87). Political positions, under this picture, must remain tentative and provisional rather than universal and absolute.

### **Refusal to Render Closure**

Our discussion about subjectivity has included a distinction between perspectives which insist on "differences between" and those which insist on "differences within". Decisions about (the nature of) subjectivity rely on epistemological and metaphysical commitments: about prior presuppositions about the nature of truth(s), the nature of knowledge, and questions about the (non)privilege of the human person within the general scheme of things. As we saw in our discussion

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<sup>61</sup> As Rabine suggests, drawing on deconstruction "...evades the metaphysical nature of taking a yes-or-no position by writing itself into an "abyss" where substitution games are multiplied *ad infinitum*. But the women's movement has no choice but to take yes-or-no position on specific issues and to communicate them as unambiguously as possible" (Rabine, 26).

of the various feminist approaches to subjectivity, these considerations will and do affect how one answers questions about the nature of the subject.

The postmodernist answer is to subvert (de-centre) the modernist conception of the stable, coherent (male) subject precisely because they also believe that there is no one, unified Truth, because they believe that all knowledge is provisional and because they believe that there can be no one-to-one correspondence between the knowing subject and the object of knowledge (only signifiers, not signifieds). Furthermore, postmodernists insist on undecidability and plurality when it comes to questions of the human person within the scheme of things (what has come to be known as "post-metaphysics"). While the elusive, non-committal attitude of postmodernists to articulate their own politics (at least in a traditional manner) cannot be ignored, neither can the postmodernist (productive) attempt to undermine and displace the basis for how one (traditionally) understands politics (in terms of stable subjectivity and a sharp distinction between the individual and community).

Interestingly, the feminist answer(s) to questions of subjectivity are not in agreement. It should not go unnoticed that the feminist answers, at least as far as this discussion has proceeded, seem to be less "coherent" or "stable" than the postmodernist answer. This may be due, in part, to the fact that postmodernists, from the outset or by their very "definition" seem to share prior presuppositions about the (im)possibility of modernist metaphysics and epistemology, while feminists do not.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> It may be helpful to note that feminist affiliations are usually denoted with a preceding adjective such as liberal feminism, socialist feminism or "postmodernist feminism".

The epistemological and metaphysical perspectives of feminists seem to influence how and what they perceive the (best) feminist response to be.

The various feminist perspectives on identity and subjectivity have illuminated the difficulties of some feminists to envision agency and the possibility for resistance without a definite, stable sense of identity. In response to some feminist claims for "identity politics", others argue that feminists must account for differences within the categories of women because, otherwise, feminists will continue to oppress women and "make them fit" into categories that cannot and should not be imposed. It is also argued that, in order to subvert the very categories that continue to oppress women, identity (and subjectivity) must be de-stabilized. However, a destabilized identity radically shakes at the foundations of (traditionally based) feminist politics. Elam claims that a transformative feminist politics must recognize the undecidable, as a "realm of continual negotiation". The politics of the undecidable would refuse to render closure on the question of difference. Interestingly, this refusal to render closure might also incapacitate the patriarchal systems which attempt to (restrictively) define "women".

Donning a whole new (postmodern) perspective and outlook for feminists, would be a radical change. Instead of burning the bra, feminists would have to burn the whole outfit; a step they might not be prepared to take. Embracing provisionality and undecidability and de-centring the subject would enact a feminist politics with a (decidedly) different look. I shall examine what a politics of the undecidable might look like in the section on "Exploring the Abyss" and, as such, will leave this

discussion inconclusive for the moment. I will refuse to render closure (at least for now) in order to investigate two other relevant concepts that have crept into our discussion a number of times but, as of yet, have not been examined: totalization and essentialism.

### **Totalization and Essentialism**

Among feminists, essentialism can be understood as a tendency of those who attempt to (re)create and (re)articulate feminine subjectivity (define all 'women') in a closed or reductionist manner. From what I have already stated, it should be evident that such a tendency is regarded as extremely problematic by postmodernists. In this section I shall explore why and how the debate about essentialism continues to haunt feminists.

The (related) problem of totalization has been critiqued by feminists and postmodernists alike. Postmodernism involves, as Lyotard puts it, an incredulity towards meta-narratives and absolutist schemas of legitimation. Postmodernists have also criticized feminists for presenting a totalizing, centred or unified framework. In this section I shall also explore the legitimacy of this criticism.

### **Essentialism: A Working Definition**

Understanding contemporary feminist theory requires an understanding of what is meant by essentialism. I will use this term, as many feminists do, to mean defining, identifying or characterizing "women" in a restrictive or reductionist manner.

Elizabeth Grosz explains it well:

Essentialism...refers to the attribution of a fixed essence to women. Women's essence is assumed to be given, universal, and is usually, though not necessarily, identified with women's biology and 'natural' characteristics...Essentialism entails that those characteristics defined as women's essence are shared in common by all women at all times: it implies a limit on the variations and possibilities of change...it thus refers to the existence of fixed characteristics, given attributes, and ahistorical functions which limit the possibilities of change and thus of social reorganization (Grosz, 1990, 334).

Generally speaking, the complaint is that essentialism has a tendency to reduce persons or groups to specific characterizations / identifications and, as such, likely excludes other important or possible characteristics or definitions. Let us examine a number of examples in order to understand the complexity of the problem.

### **Charges of Feminist Essentialism**

Virginia Held, reacting against the paradigm of the "economic man", argues that the "mothering person" and child relationship would serve as a better model for society. Held argues that this schema is better than the existing theories of social contract in how it organizes and prioritizes social life (as opposed to a focus on the individual). She suggests that the "motive behind the activity of mothering is entirely different from that behind a market transaction" (Held, 127). The mother-child relationship, Held contends, involves "permanence and non-replaceability" while market relations involve "buying and selling one unit of economic value replaceable by any other of equivalent value" (Held, 127). Furthermore, such a relationship, she argues, provides a better articulation of the "self" (Held, 131) which should be seen as co-dependent and "empowered" (Held, 131) rather than self-interested and individualistic.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> It should be noted that Held recognizes that the relationship between mother and child "is such that disparities of power are given...unequal power is almost ever present" (Held, 135). The recognition of this inequality "might encourage us to remember the point of view of those who cannot rely on the power of arms to uphold their moral claims" (Held, 135). This said, she notes that she cannot "develop these suggestions further" though "much more needs to be felt from the point of view of children" (Held, 135). For a full account of how Held sees the paradigm of mothering persons, see her

Although I think that Held is quite careful about proposing the mothering person and child relationship as a paradigm for how we should think about social relations, as an historically situated being, I have difficulty understanding such a relation in the "post-patriarchal" sense which Held advocates. While attempting to explain this social relation as "post-patriarchal", Held is "stuck" explaining it in terms that are thoroughly informed by patriarchal structures. Invoking the notion of "post-patriarchal", it seems to me, does not immediately alleviate or transform the tensions created by her essentialistic and reductivistic language and concepts. The fact that Held had to use the term "mothering" (rather than, for example, "parenting" or "fathering") reinforces and re-establishes certain (essentialistic) stereotypes of what it means to be a "mother" and/or a "father" (i.e. "women" as "mothers" are "naturally" nurturing, caring, emotive, altruistic, co-dependent whereas "men" as "fathers" are not).

One pertinent point about Held's attempts to articulate a new "feminist" position remains. Held's "mothering person", while she claims that such a person can be a male (Held, 116)<sup>64</sup>, promotes gender essentialism and may serve to reinforce, rather than reform, how we perceive and define "women". As Code suggests, "maternal feminism"<sup>65</sup> makes assumptions about human nature which, despite their

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paper "Non-contractual Society: A Feminist View", especially pp. 125-134.

<sup>64</sup> Held offers the "mothering person and child" relation as a paradigm for society (for all relationships between "selves") and, hence, as a 'universal' to replace the problematic 'universal' paradigm of relations between "rational contractors" (Held, 125). Held is not explicit about how this "mothering person" can be male, except to suggest that such a person must be understood in a post-patriarchal sense.

<sup>65</sup> Code names the work of Ruddick and Whitbeck as those which formulate such maternal feminisms (Code, 1987, 366-367).

difference [from other patriarchal or sexist schemas], risk being as reductivist and essentialist as those made in autonomy-centred theories" (Code, 1987, 368). Maternal feminism, as Code terms it, implies that all women, in order to be women, should be mothers. It also suggests that the ideal of womanhood / personhood is found in mothering, whereas a (pre-conceived, devalued) notion of mothering within many societies (albeit not homogenously) has in fact enabled the continuance of various patriarchal structures. It seems to me that even re-valued notions of "mothering" will only serve as problematic and reductionistic paradigms for human interaction precisely because any such attempt in our present society relies on re-instating dichotomies between father/mother and male/female rather than focussing on "parent" and "person". I am not attempting to dissolve the biological fact that men are not capable of child-bearing whereas, under normal conditions, women are; I am simply suggesting that presently, conceptions of "mothering" are so loaded with problematic connotations that any attempt to articulate attributes of motherhood as "post-patriarchal" will inevitably re-invoke problematic, reductionistic conceptions of what it means to be a woman. Until notions of mothering can be understood in less reductivistic and less essentialistic ways, attempts at articulating what it means to be a "mother" will only serve to re-create and re-establish patriarchal schemas of social organization.

Feminist calls to universal "sisterhood" can often be a sign of an essentialistic tendency. Feminists use a variety of notions, claimed as "basic", in order to construct alternative social theories and in order to define what it means to be a woman. Mothering, reproduction, sex-affective production, gender, feminine nature etc. have all

been suggested, at one point or another, in various manners, as being "basic" and as having cross-cultural, a-historical explanatory power<sup>66</sup>. There is, Hekman notes,

...a strong tendency in contemporary feminist theory to appeal to a universal feminine nature, a feminist epistemology, a distinctive feminine way of knowing, or "maternal thinking". Postmodernism offers a number of convincing arguments as to why such a move in feminist theory is self-defeating (Hekman, 38).

Before we move on to why postmodernists argue that essentialism is self-defeating, let us look at how frequent and varied charges of (feminist) essentialism can be.

Appeals by feminists to a universal feminine nature (to gender as basic or other essentialist commitments) come in a variety of forms. Carol Gilligan has been accused of articulating "a different voice" of women's moral development which has neglected to account for historical circumstances and cultural influences<sup>67</sup>. Nancy Chodorow has been criticized of ignoring the affects of culture and of repressing differences among "sisters" in her explanation of gender as basic<sup>68</sup>. Some have stated that once the essentialism is removed from Sandra Harding's "standpoint epistemology", it loses its ability to characterize or generalize about the nature of "woman" and, as such, "its goal of using women's view points to gain the truth is undermined" (McCaughey, 17). Mary Daly and Adrienne Rich have been criticized for their positions on reclaiming the female body as "the primary constituent of our

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<sup>66</sup> Grosz makes a similar point when she suggests that essentialism usually entails biologism, naturalism or that women's essence is seen to reside in certain psychological characteristics such as nurturance, empathy, supportiveness etc. (Grosz, 1990, 334).

<sup>67</sup> See Fraser & Nicholson, p. 32.

<sup>68</sup> See Fraser & Nicholson, p. 31.

identity and the source of our female essence" (Alcoff, 1988, 410). I list these criticisms cursively to illustrate how frequently the charge of "essentialism" is rendered within (and from outside) feminist circles. As Fraser & Nicholson suggest,

...essentialist vestiges persist in the continued use of ahistorical categories like gender identity without reflection as to how, when and why such categories originated and were modified over time...feminist scholarship has remained insufficiently attentive to the theoretical prerequisites of dealing with diversity, despite widespread commitment to accepting it politically (Fraser & Nicholson, 33).

As we shall investigate in a moment, postmodernists have been one group to insist that feminists remain too essentialistic and too inattentive to the nuances of addressing difference and diversity<sup>69</sup>.

It may be helpful to note that, while charges of feminist essentialism are varied and frequent, both feminists who advocate equality or sameness with men (liberal feminists) and those who claim difference from men (radical feminists) embrace an "essentialist commitment to identity" (Ebert, 891). They both subscribe to "...basic humanist tenets as the autonomy, unity, and inviolability of the self, a self that is identical with itself or "self-same", whether that self is defined in terms of a coherent rationality or maternalism" (Ebert, 891). Liberal and radical feminisms, albeit in different ways, depend on certain notions of what it means to be a woman. The identity of women, in these pictures, is either seen as (essentially) *the same as* or *differentiated from* men.

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<sup>69</sup> As Flax notes, "Deconstructive readers are...suspicious of all "natural" categories, essentialist oppositions and representational claims" (Flax, 1990a, 37).

### **The Difficulty with Feminist Essentialism**

Those that insist on portraying a male and female "nature", which, interestingly is done both by feminists and anti-feminists, argue that the female "nature" (i.e. nurture, care, relatedness etc.) should be privileged just as much as, or more than "male" attributes. The problem with such an approach is that while it re-valorizes one side of the traditional, Western male/female dichotomy, it does not displace the dichotomy itself. Hekman argues that any attempt to re-valorize the "female" will necessarily fail:

By accepting the rational/irrational distinction that privileges the masculine, radical feminists perpetuate the dichotomy that constitutes feminine inferiority. Much as we might laud the "feminine" values the radical feminists proclaim, these values will continue to be viewed as inferior until the dichotomy itself is displaced...it cannot simply be reversed (Hekman, 41).

Furthermore, such an emphasis on female "nature", however that is worked out, will inevitably account for some experiences while ignoring others. The postmodernist argument suggests that promoting an a-historical or cross-cultural feminine nature also promotes false universalism, a universalism which will be unable to account for other important aspects of what it might mean to be a "woman" and what the oppression of "women" might mean. Alcoff summarizes the difficulty: "...essentialist formulations of womanhood, even when made by feminists, 'tie' the individual to her identity as a woman and thus cannot represent a solution to sexism" (Alcoff, 1988, 415). The oppression of all women is not equatable: all women are not oppressed in the same manner, nor to the same degree<sup>70</sup>. Until conceptions of "woman" can be understood in

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<sup>70</sup> Elam makes a similar point (Elam, 1994, 31).

less reductivistic and less essentialistic ways, attempts at articulating what it means to be a "woman" will only serve to re-create and re-establish patriarchal representation. Essentialist commitments to identity restrict and repress women in such a way as to reinforce the problem, rather than solve it.

### **The (Essential) Paradox**

While feminists often problematically essentialize about the nature of "women", they are also left in somewhat of a predicament<sup>71</sup>. Feminists are forced both to speak on behalf of, and against, (problematic generalizations of) what it means to be a woman. Speaking on "behalf of", however, involves generalizations or definitions which will invariably lead to some form of essentialism. Grosz states the difficulty well: "...if women cannot be characterized in any general way, if all there is to femininity is socially produced, then how can feminism be taken seriously? What justifies the assumption that women are oppressed as a sex?" (Grosz, 1990, 341). While speaking and theorizing essentialistically is problematic, so, apparently, is its opposite.

At this juncture one might also question whether speaking in a non-essentialist manner is even an option. Spivak realizes the difficulty (perhaps impossibility) of not talking in an essentialist manner:

The debate between essentialism and anti-essentialism is really not the crucial debate. It is not possible to be non-essentialist, as I said; the subject is always centred. The real debate is between those two ways of representing. Even

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<sup>71</sup> This parallels our discussion of the dilemma(s) of defining women and feminism.

non-fundamentalist philosophies must represent themselves as non-foundationalist philosophies (Spivak, 109).

Communication or representation seems to rely on defining, generalizing and perhaps even essentializing. For these reasons Spivak urges a "strategic" use of essentialist discourse (Spivak, 11): "Since one cannot not be an essentialist, why not look at the ways in which one is essentialist, carve out a representative essentialist position, and then do politics according to the old rules whilst remembering the dangers in this?" (Spivak, 45). However, Spivak's response may leave one feeling uncomfortable.

Reminiscent of Derrida's claim that one can use the oppressors weapons against them and then happily discard them, Spivak's "strategy" insists that we both critique essentialistic discourse and use it when necessary. However, Spivak's claims are to the point if one recognizes the number of times within this thesis, for example, I was forced to state positions, make generalizations and formulate objections which necessitated essentialistic language. While the dangers of essentialism cannot go unnoticed, neither can the fact that we all, at various times and in various ways, need to formulate and articulate positions which will reduce and characterize in an essentialistic manner. Furthermore, it must be noted that there are times when essentialism may be a good thing: if it is agreed that women are oppressed as a sex and that some sort of feminist agenda may serve to alleviate that oppression, then essentialistic language becomes a necessity. Feminists must both argue against particular essentialistic characterizations of women and use essentialistic claims to combat them. Spivak's argument that the essentialist/anti-essentialist dichotomy is undecidable and uneradicatable is one which we must consider seriously. To

essentialize or not to essentialize is clearly not a simple matter of deciding which is the most "rational" course of action. Perhaps "embracing" undecidability about the (false) dichotomy of essentialism/anti-essentialism may serve to help feminists overcome and navigate around the quagmire of an impossible dilemma.

In order to continue this line of investigation it may be helpful to examine a related problem. An exploration of (feminist) totalization and the postmodernist critique of totalization may serve to illuminate the negotiations necessary for a discussion between feminists and postmodernists.

### **Totalization**

Similar to the problem of essentialism, totalizing discourse inevitably includes some elements at the expense of others: "...whenever a story appears unified or whole something must have been suppressed in order to sustain the appearance of unity" (Flax, 1990a, 37)<sup>72</sup>. Minnich's definition of "faulty generalization" can also help illuminate the postmodern critique of totalization:

Faulty generalization and/or universalization is the result of faulty abstraction, of taking humans of a particular kind to be the only ones who are significant, the only ones who can represent or set the standard for all humans (Minnich, 51).

While postmodernists would agree that totalizing schemas of representation problematically take humans of a particular kind to be the only ones who are significant, their critique of totalization or universalization runs deeper than Minnich's.

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<sup>72</sup> For a further explanation of this idea, see the section on deconstructionist strategy and definition.

Postmodernists insist that the problem with totalization or universalization is not that it is, at times, "faulty" but, rather, that any one totalizing schema of representation, by its very "nature", cannot hope to account for all the "relevant" factors or to grasp "reality" essentially. Totalization and/or universalization will always be "faulty" according to postmodernists for there is no rational, scientific or other (over-arching) method for "getting it right"; there are only multiple voices and discourses with no accounting for what is "relevant" outside of those discourses (i.e. "relevance" is discourse-dependent).

Postmodernists hope to shake at the foundations of totalizing pictures in order to illuminate that which was suppressed. As Flax puts it, "By interrogating and disrupting these totalizing logics, postmodernists hope to open up spaces in which suppressed heterogeneity, discontinuity, and difference will reappear" (Flax, 1990a, 41).<sup>73</sup> The postmodernist critique of totalization also hopes to alter our premonitions about the possibility of "getting it right", of acquiring the Truth with a capital "T". We will examine if and how the postmodernist critique of totalization, foundationalism<sup>74</sup> and "meta-narratives" would aid feminists in more carefully negotiating the path between recognizing difference and realizing their own (unified?) political agenda.

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<sup>73</sup> Parallels to our discussion of deconstructionist strategies can be seen here.

<sup>74</sup> Hekman notes that "Both liberal and socialist feminism are rooted in the modernist presuppositions of the creeds that define them. Likewise, radical feminists who attempt to provide an absolute grounding for knowledge in a feminist rather than masculinist epistemology are also following the foundationalist principles of modernist thought" (Hekman, 153).

### **Patriarchy as a Totalizing Framework**

Feminists, themselves, also argue against totalizing discourse; in particular, against male-biased or patriarchal totalizing schemas. Feminists argue that universalistic and totalizing logics are those of a male-dominated tradition which represent the "male" perspective as the "human" perspective and that, as such, these totalizing pictures must be abandoned<sup>75</sup>. Totalizing patriarchal discourse embodies the pretension to "knowing" how women are, what their place "naturally" is, and what the place of women should be (in relation to the position of men). This totalizing schema has pervaded the constitution of Western society for centuries and has necessitated the very existence of feminism. Feminism itself is, at least in part, defined by its struggle against patriarchal totalizing schemas of representation.

### **Feminist Totalization**

However, feminist articulations of the problems associated with sexism and patriarchy have also been dangerously near, if not outright guilty of, espousing totalizing claims at the expense of other negated and suppressed elements. In particular, because of their inattention to oppressive forces other than sexism, feminists have been criticized for implying that the oppression of persons due to race, sexual orientation or class, for example, can all be subsumed under patriarchal categories of

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<sup>75</sup> See, for example, Houston, p. 259 and Morgan, p. 223.

oppression<sup>76</sup>. Smith & Watson warn that

...it is a central instance of the universalizing agenda of Western theorizing that erases the subject's heterogeneity as well as its agency. This agenda has become increasingly apparent in feminist theories that hypostasize a universally colonized "woman," universally subjected to "patriarchal" oppression. As [some] theorists...insist, privileging the oppression of gender over and above other oppressions effectively erases the complex and other contradictory positionings of the subject (Smith & Watson, xiv)<sup>77</sup>.

Feminists are cautioned to be wary of appeals to the common oppression of women or to a common language of women for if such a feminism does not (and it probably cannot) adequately address all forms of oppression, it will end up practicing other forms of social injustice. Spivak cautions against a feminist totalitarianism:

...the absolute insistence on women's oppression being the final determinant of any problem that one is considering...from that angle...I find feminism as a single-issue movement somewhat terrifying...I'm deeply concerned with a persistent critique of a totalization which can in fact in the long run lead to totalitarianism (Spivak, 118).

When feminist (totalizing) discourse is negligent of the differences between women it is in danger of propagating other forms of oppression.

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<sup>76</sup> The recognition of difference(s) and diversity "...raises the possibility that divergent conceptual, theoretical frameworks may not be reducible to one another or to a common ground" (Wylie, 65). Feminists must recognize the irreducibility of the oppression of women to one single, identifying factor.

<sup>77</sup> Di Stefano also states that some "...charge that gender and its cohort of core assumptions and terms are guilty of the same totalization with which humanism was previously charged. On this view, gender is implicated in a disastrous and oppressive fiction, the fiction of "woman" which runs roughshod over multiple differences among and within women who are ill-served by a conception of gender as basic. For some writers, gender is not more and perhaps not even as basic as poverty, class, ethnicity, race, sexual identity, and ages...The argument here is that a notion of gender as basic merely serves to reify, rather than to critically contest, transform, and escape the imposed myth of difference, while it ignores other crucial and as yet subjugated arenas of difference" (Di Stefano, 65).

Totalizing discourse, beyond its mitigation of differences, makes a claim to (knowing the) Truth. The paradox, as Creed puts it, "is that while we [feminists] regard patriarchal discourses as fictions, we nevertheless proceed as if our position, based on a belief in the oppression of women, were somehow closer to the truth" (Creed, 416). Feminist totalizing discourse is not only negligent of differences, it, like any seriously held position, embodies the assumption that it is right<sup>78</sup>.

Our discussion of totalization and essentialism has illustrated a problem within (at least some) feminist work: namely, that feminists, with earnest desires to eliminate patriarchal oppression have neglected to adequately notice and address differences among women. If it is granted that, as Fraser and Nicholson put it, "...feminist scholarship has remained insufficiently attentive to the theoretical prerequisites of dealing with diversity" (Fraser & Nicholson, 33), how are feminists to proceed? Remaining or becoming attentive to difference and diversity does not come without its own difficulties (and differences of opinion).

### **Feminist Responses**

Feminist responses to postmodernist criticisms of totalization and essentialism vary. Brodribb bemoans the loss of the feminist right to claim truth and justice:

...the law of postmodernism is Father Knows Best...Feminism is the Devil, staked out and variously pilloried as bourgeois deviation, biological determinism, foundationalism and essentialism...I define poststructuralism/postmodernism as a... scene of repression of women's claims

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<sup>78</sup> Parallels to our discussion of feminist essentialism can be seen here. We will discuss these connections at the end of this section.

for truth and justice (Brodribb, 20).

Brodribb's complaint is that postmodernism, as patriarchy in new clothes, only seeks to repress women's claims for truth and justice. On the other extreme, Hekman insists that feminists can no longer make such Enlightenment, meta-narrative claims for truth and justice: "In the postmodern era feminists cannot oppose the discourses of male domination by appealing to a metanarrative of universal justice and freedom" (Hekman, 188). Different starting points and perspectives perpetuate the debate regarding feminist essentialization and totalization.

One of the strongest arguments against the postmodernist claim against totalizing discourse uses postmodernist tenets against itself. Articulating the postmodernist "claim" against totalizing discourse requires a unified, perhaps totalized, commitment:

...one of the positions central to postmodernism is that there are no places left from which to speak--there are no "Truths", Beliefs", or "positions". Yet this is in itself a position, and one now in danger of becoming a new orthodoxy. Even, perhaps, a master discourse? (Creed, 416).

This new postmodernist "master discourse", in turn, serves the concrete political and social interests of those who deploy this discourse. Flax also notes the unified nature of postmodernist discourse:

Postmodernists are also unified in their rejections of certain positions. They all reject representational and objective or rational concepts of knowledge and truth; grand, synthetic theorizing meant to comprehend Reality as and in a unified whole; and any concept of self or subjectivity in which it is not understood as produced as an effect of discursive practices (Flax, 1990a, 188)

Postmodernism, itself, seems to require its own totalizing, unified narrative. Spivak, a self-proclaimed deconstructionist, agrees: "...deconstruction does present final and

total positions, because it is not possible to avoid presenting final and total positions...But there is a kind of safety valve which says, 'Do not make them universal'" (Spivak, 45).

### **The (Total) Paradox**

Our discussion about the undecidability of the anti-essentialist/essentialist dichotomy can shed some light on this discussion. To make a claim for completely anti-totalizing discourse, while it may alleviate some of the problems with totalizing discourse, is to make an impossible claim. To make a claim for complete heterogeneity would be nonsensical. It seems that thinking and theorizing require one to tell a story that makes (at least some) integral sense. However, this story (and other stories) do not, necessarily, have to be absolutist; they can be amended and changed (even "played" with) depending on the circumstances and the fluidity of the situation. Totalizing discourse cannot be replaced by its opposite; anti-totalizing discourse must still play on the margins of totalizing discourse. The difficulties of totalization and anti-totalization cannot be considered in an either/or manner. Just as we recognized the undecidable nature of the anti-essentialist/essentialist dichotomy, we must also note that the recognition of the undecidable and uneradicatable "nature" of the totalization/anti-totalization debate may serve to help feminists navigate around the quagmire of an(other) impossible dilemma.

A different dilemma is raised when feminists embrace the non-totalized "difference" of the postmodernists. "Difference" in the postmodernist sense means

"...the irreducible particularity of entities, which makes it impossible to reduce them to commonness or bring them into unity without a remainder" (Young, 304). The postmodernist recognition of difference resists closure and unity. As we noted in our discussion of subjectivity, a postmodernist perspective "insists"<sup>79</sup> on difference, discontinuity and fragmentation while (feminist) political action seems to rely on coherence, solidarity and unity. What we can now see, however, is that to set the argument up this way is to immediately make another (problematic) distinction, a distinction between continuity and discontinuity<sup>80</sup>. To treat discontinuity, Corlett notes, "as the 'other' of continuity gives continuity more credit than it deserves" (Corlett, 59). Different perspectives will emphasize one or the other. However, whether one gives continuity or discontinuity more or less credit is not the sole issue. It must also be noted that our distinction between the two supposed poles is, perhaps, likely closer than we think. It seems that "complete" discontinuity and complete continuity are both practical impossibilities.

While feminists might be seen to be emphasizing the continuity of (total) patriarchal structures, postmodernists might be seen to be emphasizing the discontinuity (of any perspective). The fear for feminists is that if feminists abandon the hopes of critiquing continuous, global structures of patriarchy they will also abandon the hope of its dissolution. Ebert puts it thus:

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<sup>79</sup> This insistence might be seen as the coherent action.

<sup>80</sup> This distinction is also, at times, understood as a distinction between community and individuality.

For an emancipatory politics that seeks to intervene in and transform patriarchal structures of oppression which organize and "overdetermine" every woman (and in a different way, every man) can only be formulated through the critique of the global relations of difference, through an intervention in the structures of oppression: both at the macrolevel of their structural organization of domination and at the microlevel of different and contradictory manifestations of oppression (Ebert, 902).

Ebert's complaint is that, politically, the result of rejecting totalized discourse only leaves room for some form of (discontinuous) contextualism or localism. Such an approach, while perhaps also necessary, is (apparently) unable to relate back to global relations or structures of patriarchal oppression<sup>81</sup>.

We have seen how (at least some) feminists (problematically) espouse essentialistic and totalized discourse while, at the same time, arguing for the abolition of totalizing patriarchal schemas. Ignoring or mitigating difference(s) within some feminist work has spawned furious debate and criticism. Postmodernists may be able to help feminists become more attuned to the importance and prevalence of difference(s). However, the postmodernist "position" itself is not without its own problems. Attending to difference and complete heterogeneity may, if taken to the extreme, disenable unified political action. Furthermore, postmodernists will have difficulty claiming a "total" ban on totalization.

Whether the argument between feminist and postmodernist positions be raised

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<sup>81</sup> Best and Kellner make a similar observation: "...certain postmodern positions directly contradict political objectives of at least a certain kind of political feminism, as when postmodern polemics against macrotheory undercut the need for more general theories of women's subordination and oppression" (Best & Kellner, 209).

as one about essentialism versus anti-essentialism, totalization versus anti-totalization, continuity versus discontinuity, community versus individuality, or global versus local, the difficulty is the same. False dichotomies cannot hope to alleviate or reconcile (irreconcilable) differences. The recognition of the impurity, impossibility and undecidability of these either/or positions, while it does not entail a simple solution, may at least serve to open lines of (tentative) communication between two (apparently but not necessarily) disparate positions. Recognizing the uncertainty and discontinuity between feminist and postmodernist projects may enable a productive conversation; a conversation that does not necessarily have to be absolute or final. The next section on "Exploring the Abyss" will examine what feminism might look like in the fluctuating lights of this sort of discontinuity and uncertainty.

### Exploring the Abyss: New Spaces

In the vocabulary of postmodernism the term 'abyss' is used in a positive sense. The suspected origin is Nietzsche's use of *abgründlich* (often translated into English as "abysmal") in connection with his thesis of "eternal return". Nietzsche's use of *abgründlich*, like the postmodernist use of the term 'abyss', suggests 'without metaphysical foundation'<sup>82</sup>. It is claimed that the postmodernist 'abyss' and insistence on "anti-" or "post-" metaphysical thinking subsequently leads to 'new spaces' in which to conceive of 'being'.

The 'abyss' can be understood as a denial of the possibility for grounded certainty and, as such, it is understood as a place of radical possibility. One manner of characterizing the abyss or this "opening is in terms of "displacement"...the displacing effect is one...of deferral rather than arrival" (Elam, 1994, 24). Displacing existing structures and conceptual schemas includes an emphasis on change; however, this change is not from one definable point to another. Rather, displacement involves a move away from certainty and foundations in order to radically question the possibility of any foundation whatsoever. Displacement and the deferral of consensus enables the possibility for new "spaces". These new spaces are not to be conceived of

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<sup>82</sup> Nietzsche's use of *abgründlich* can be found in "On the Vision and the Riddle" in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where he calls eternal return "*my abgründlichen Gedanken*". *Abgründlich* is Nietzsche's own term; the usual German adjective for "like an abyss" is "*abgründig*" and "abysmal" is usually "*entsetzlich*". It has been suggested that Nietzsche's term combines both (multiple) meanings and hence connotes that which lacks a ground and which is set (*setzen*) apart (*ent-*). It is also interesting to note that in German "*abgründlich*" can also mean "cryptic" or "ironic" (as well as "like an abyss"). I am thankful to Robert Burch for pointing out this reference to me.

as enclosed or fixed. I will explore whether affirming the 'abyss' and the subsequent 'new spaces' created by postmodernists opens up or negates the possibility for continual social and political change.

Some feminists argue that the postmodernist 'abyss' and this kind of Nietzschean (anti- or) post-metaphysical thinking is a re-affirmation of patriarchy or, as Brodribb puts it, another "ruse" of dominant, white, bourgeois men<sup>83</sup>. Other feminists seek to explore what those 'new spaces' might mean and how sexual difference might be understood from a transitional, fragmented and radically contingent perspective. In order to understand how feminist writers might investigate and understand these 'new spaces', I will look at how one might understand postmodern pluralism, multiplicity and play and then go on to examine the work of Diane Elam who creatively and carefully explores what these new spaces of radical possibility might mean for feminists. Such an examination may enable one to get a better idea of whether or not these spaces allow for the possibility of "more adequate" representations of women.

### **Postmodern Pluralism, Multiplicity and Play**

Before I explore how feminist and postmodernist projects might co-operate or, at least, co-exist, the context of postmodern politics must be examined. The postmodernist project involves, as Hekman puts it, a "replacement of oppositions with multiplicity". Emphasis on play, imagination and plurality thoroughly inform

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<sup>83</sup> These arguments were explored under the section on feminist approaches to subjectivity.

postmodernist discourse as does the abhorrence of dichotomous thinking, (modernist) metaphysics and, in general, unified or totalizing schemas of representation. Flax states that

Deconstructive readers are...willing to play with the text, to disrupt its apparent unity, to rescue its heterogeneous and disorderly aspects and its plurality of meanings and voices. They are not to think of themselves as author(ities) or as un- or dis- covers of Truth, but rather as potentially interesting members of an ongoing conversation (Flax, 1990a, 37).

Structured (philosophical) debates are "out"; talks or conversations are "in". In short, a postmodernist world involves and negotiates for playful multiplicity, uncertainty, and plurality.

It should be noted at this point that the term "play", within the postmodern context, generally has to do with freedom, movement, fluidity and games. Free play is seen as excluding totalization and as being limitless: it is "...unlimited by any irreducible signified or transcendental concept that cannot be further decomposed...it manifests itself in the process of indefinite substitution" (Wilson, 16). Words such as substitution, displacement, dissolution and deferral often accompany descriptions of deconstructive "play". Deconstructive play hopes to go beyond stable, centred, totalized structures in order to de-centre and de-privilege them. It might be seen, Wilson suggests, as "...a kaleidoscope: an endless linear series of permutations, each spectacular in itself, each different, with no potential for correction, enhancement, or culmination" (Wilson, 69). Wilson's metaphor is telling: play, understood within the postmodern context, is (completely) plural, endless and incapable of error or

finalisation<sup>84</sup>. It is with this understanding of postmodern play and plurality that one can begin to understand postmodern politics.

I noted in the introduction that postmodernism (and feminism) can be understood as responses to and against Enlightenment thinking. The question that may now be asked is whether or not, in articulating postmodernism as opposed to Enlightenment ideals, another false opposition has been created.<sup>85</sup> Hartsock complains that

It may be objected that I am calling for the construction of another totalizing and falsely universal discourse. But that is to be imprisoned by the alternatives posed by Enlightenment thought and postmodernism: either one must adopt the perspective of the transcendental and disembodied voice of reason, or one must abandon the goal of accurate and systematic knowledge of the world. Other possibilities exist... (Hartsock, 1987a, 205).

Cornell and Benhabib ask this question as a question about where to go beyond the politics of gender: "...To a radical transcendence of the logic of binary oppositions altogether or to a utopian realization of forms of otherness, immanent in present psychosexual arrangements, but currently frozen within the confines of rigid genderized thinking?" (Benhabib & Cornell, 1987, 15). To set up the debate, as we

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<sup>84</sup> To explore the meaning(s) and use(s) of the term "play" further, see Wilson's In Palamedes' Shadow.

<sup>85</sup> Flax, who usually alerts and warns her readers of oppositional thinking, sets up such a dichotomy: "...despite an understandable attraction to the (apparently) logical, orderly world of the Enlightenment, feminist theory more properly belongs in the terrain of postmodern theory. Feminist notions of self, knowledge, and truth are too contradictory to those of the Enlightenment to be contained within its categories" (Flax, 1990a, 183). Also see Flax, 1990a, p. 140.

noticed in the section on Definition, in an either/or manner is immediately to take a side in favour of a modernist or Enlightenment perspective.

The discussion deserves more than a simplistic either/or approach. However the discussion is conceived, whether as Enlightenment/postmodernism, as theory/practice or even as feminism/postmodernism, such problematic hierarchies or dichotomies must be avoided. Grosz alerts us to the fact that neither perspective (or side of a dichotomy) is so simple, nor so "pure" as to adequately address the relevant issues:

It is no longer a matter of maintaining a theoretical purity at the cost of political principles; nor is it simply a matter of the *ad hoc* adoption of theoretical principles according to momentary needs or whims: it is a question of negotiating a path between always impure positions, seeing that politics is always already bound up with what it contests (including theories), and theories are always implicated in various political struggles (whether this be acknowledged or not) (Grosz, 1990, 342).

Both feminism and postmodernism are "impure", context-dependent, incomplete perspectives rather than simple opposites. Subsequently, the answer as to the possibility of an amicable relationship between the two is not a simple yes or no.

Feminist political practices (and various feminist positions) always depend upon other theoretical and philosophical positions and commitments (as we saw in the variety of feminist responses to subjectivity, for example) and, similarly, postmodernists are not without their own "positions" and "politics", as much as they might have us believe otherwise.

Any attempted discussion of the "tenets" of postmodernism itself (scare-quotes or not) merely and perfectly re-illuminates the postmodernist point. "Embracing

postmodernism" is a contradiction in terms precisely because postmodernism asks us to resist closure and to negotiate ever so carefully about how we embrace any "position". Yeatman ask whether there are certain transcendental norms embedded within the very idea of negotiation (Yeatman, 2). Her answer is telling:

Postmodern critical theory has to accept that these criteria are transcendent in the sense of providing regulative norms for the very dialogic possibilities of contestation, debate and negotiation. However, by insisting these norms are creatures of discourse, it brings out their contestable nature (Yeatman, 2).

The process of negotiation, itself, is not without its own trajectory. While postmodernist discourse may not be absolutist, it is not without its own agenda, whether that be within the context of politics or philosophy. Even if those political commitments only involve, as Spivak puts it, "wishy-washy pluralism", there are preferences, at least posed in the negative, which motivate a postmodernist. Elam suggests a possible way in which one can understand postmodern politics: "...[it] is better understood as a questioning of the terms in which we understand the political, rather than as a simple negation of the political" (Elam, 1994, 67). Postmodernism is not negative politics. It is, itself, context-dependent and historically situated; its commitments are not neutral and do not exist independent of (de-centred or fragmented) persons.

If we understand postmodernism as promoting some form of pluralism or, at minimum, to be a critique of how we (traditionally) understand politics, it must also recognize and cope with the dilemmas that arise from such a perspective. Pluralism, it seems, is unable to analyze, evaluate or cope with global structures. Ebert notes that "Pluralism itself involves a very insidious exclusion as far as any politics of change is

concerned; it excludes and occludes the critique of global or structural relations of power as "ideological" and "totalizing" (Ebert, 898). Pluralism, for good or ill, negates the possibility for global critique<sup>86</sup>.

A related problem involves the inability of pluralism to discern and evaluate between "differing" voices. As Flax notes, "The political problems intrinsic to both pluralism and pragmatism include how to resolve conflict among competing voices." (Flax, 1990a, 233). Pluralism itself is not an unproblematic position. It, unsurprisingly, espouses multiplicity but has difficulty accounting for global dynamics of power and evaluating competing claims. The conclusion of one of Margaret Atwood's vignettes (in her book *Good Bones*) continually and relentlessly runs through my mind: "You don't like this future? Switch it off. Order another. Return to sender" (Atwood, 96). The pluralistic postmodernist smorgasbord initially sounds like a promising, endlessly satisfying option, but its implications may also be endlessly unsatisfying. Postmodernists, it seems, must also come to recognize that being completely politically pluralistic is to embrace a false consciousness; there are times when one cannot simply 'order another and return to sender'. Best and Kellner note that "Politicizing postmodern theory in a creative way could help avoid the dead ends and traps of extreme postmodern theory by overcoming nihilism and defeatism evident in some varieties of postmodern theory" (Best & Kellner, 214). The postmodern

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<sup>86</sup> As Best & Kellner state: "...an extreme postmodern theory can occlude important common interests and provide no basis for a politics of alliance" (Best & Kellner, 212) and "Common interests can be obscured in favour of heterogeneity, difference and fragmentation that ultimately buttresses white male and capitalist domination" (Best & Kellner, 213).

pretensions to be capable of being (completely) politically pluralistic must be unmasked and recognized if the hopes of productive alliances between feminists and postmodernists are to be realized. It is within this context that I will consider a new feminist approach to exploring the "abyss".

### **Groundless Solidarity**

Articulating a feminist perspective in a non-foundationalistic manner is not without difficulties. Hekman's re-occurring claim is that "...feminists cannot overcome the privileging of the male and devaluing of the female until they reject the [Enlightenment] epistemology that created these categories" (Hekman, 8). For her this means abandoning the subject/object dichotomy, the nature/culture debates and completely ridding our theoretical frameworks of modernist notions about totalized and unified discourse. How this is to be done baffles feminists such as Jennifer Ring: "Anything is possible in a deconstructed world...it offers no basis, indeed, it self-consciously denies the very possibility of a solidly grounded alternative. It surrenders too much" (Ring, 20). Removing the "ground" of feminist discourse disturbs and scares many feminists.

Nonetheless, for Diane Elam groundlessness involves a denial of any solid ground or foundation. The relationship between feminism and postmodernism should be seen as foundationless and includes the denial of any solid ground of post-feminism or beyond deconstruction (Elam, 1994, 25): "There is no morning after. No point of arrival and no mourning after" (Elam, 1994, 25). Elam hopes to show that the

relationship between feminism and postmodernism is not one of consensus but of "groundless solidarity". This means, she states, that there must be "...a deferral of consensus not at the cost of political solidarity or ethical judgement" (Elam, 1994, 25).

Elam introduces the concept of the "*ms. en abyme*" which is the "...infinite displacement brought about by feminism and deconstruction: the displacement of the subject, of identity politics, of the subject of feminism and deconstruction" (Elam 1994, 25). Elam's term "*ms. en abyme*" is from deconstructionists' use of the term "*mise en abyme*"<sup>87</sup>: "...a representation in which the relation of part to whole is inverted: the "whole" image is itself represented in part of the image" (Elam, 1994, 27). She claims that the *ms. en abyme*, while it does involve "looking into the abyss" does not necessitate "falling into it".

The *ms. en abyme* is the structure of infinite deferral, of infinite regression in representation. Women, for example, cannot be adequately or completely represented. Hence, the structure of the *ms. en abyme* continually defers closed or absolutist representations of women. Any specific representation of a woman is seen as one among many or as another instance illustrating the impossibility of completely representing women. Greater accuracy in details of representation only allow one to see the impossibility of grasping the representation fully: "...women may be represented, but the attempt to represent them exhaustively only makes us more aware

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<sup>87</sup> One might notice the deconstructionists' pun on "*ms. en abyme/mise en scene*" ("women in abyss" versus the more directorial "*put in the scene*" or "*stage-setting*"). I am thankful to Robert Burch for pointing out these linguistic nuances.

of the failure of such attempts" (Elam, 1994, 28)<sup>88</sup>. The *ms. en abyme* disenables the subject/object dichotomy by constantly deferring and confusing the one for the other. This destabilization is necessary because of the problems of the objectivization of women and the problems with assuming the possibility of a stable, coherent subject which we investigated earlier.

The *ms. en abyme* questions and displaces how, in Western theory, we have constructed "women", gender and sex as "natural". Elam argues that feminists must not be in the business of establishing these categories. Rather, "...the focus should be on keeping sexual difference--understood as the complex interplay of sex and gender roles--open as the space of a radical uncertainty" (Elam, 1994, 56). From within the structure of the *ms. en abyme*, Elam argues for a "politics of the undecidable" which does not presume some absolutist "accounting procedure": the "...political is better understood as the realm of continual negotiation, as a matter of negotiation in the absence of any accounting procedure" (Elam, 1994, 81). Elam insists that the politics of the undecidable does not necessitate nihilism or relativism but rather, opens up the possibility for new political spaces: "...politics is an encounter with difference, the attempt to handle differences...this handling cannot...be given determinate meaning. There are differences, they arise, always more of them" (Elam, 1994, 84). The politics of the undecidable can be seen in sharp contrast to the determinate nature of (traditional) politics which has closed the doors on difference, enabling oppression by

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<sup>88</sup> Elam uses the example of the Quaker Oats man who holds a Quaker Oats box, which in turn depicts the Quaker Oats man holding a box with a Quaker Oats man...and so on *ad infinitum* (Elam, 1994, 27).

its inability to re-open those doors.

Elam is careful to claim that the politics of the undecidable is not about refusing to make decisions but, rather, "...it is about refusing to ground decisions in universal laws" (Elam, 1994, 87). She also insists that such politics must engage itself with ethics in that it must consider obligations and responsibilities. The ability to "...make judgements and take actions begins with the displacement of the assurance of a self-present subject...yet...the means of legitimating those judgements" should not be supplied in the forms of universal laws, natural rights or self-present subjects (Elam, 1994, 87-88). Elam's articulation of the politics of the undecidable, understood with the help of the concept of the *ms. en abyme*, prevents the "centred subject" from making oppressive totalizing claims by virtue of an inattentiveness to (sexual and other) difference(s).

We have seen how Elam has creatively examined how the *ms. en abyme* might serve to open up new spaces and new representations of women that are not restrictive, essentialistic or absolutist. Elam's suggestions are but one example of how feminist and postmodernist aims can serve to help each other. Recognizing (sexual) difference without formulating problematic hierarchies or constructing absolutist programs is a worthy challenge to us all.

### **Feminist Strategy and Postmodernism**

We noted earlier that feminists are (rightfully) wary of the timing of the introduction of uncertainty, postmodernity and the unstable subject in light of the fact

that women are finally beginning to find their own voices and articulate their own subject position (the "why now?" question). Resonant of the feminists that are resistant to postmodernist pulses, Rabine states:

The deconstruction of metaphysical oppositions always takes place in a context of social hierarchy where speaker and listener, writer and reader, are placed in power relations with each other, no matter what the content of the text. Whether this play is progressive depends on who does it to whom, what is its historic or institutional context, and who makes the rules (Rabine, 28).

Rabine's questions are important ones for feminists. Who directs the postmodernist agenda? Who makes the "rules"?

Feminists are forced to think strategically about what it means to be postmodernist, and what that might mean for feminism. The "why now?" camp insists that postmodernism is to be avoided because it is patriarchal and sexist. This claim involves two jumps: 1) that postmodernism is inherently sexist or patriarchal; and 2) that anything patriarchal must be avoided. Let us assume, for the purposes of this discussion, that postmodernism could very well be patriarchal or sexist. This does not necessarily lead us to the conclusion that it must be avoided. Grosz puts the argument well:

[the] ...(historically) necessary use of patriarchal terms is the very condition of feminism's effectivity in countering and displacing the effects of patriarchy: its immersion in patriarchal practices (including those surrounding the production of theory) is the condition of its effective critique of and movement beyond them. This immersion provides not only the conditions under which feminism can become familiar with what it criticizes: it also provides the very means by which patriarchal dominance can be challenged (Grosz, 1990, 343).

If postmodernism is simply another "male ruse", Grosz's argument is to the point.

Feminists must remember that they too, do not exist in a vacuum: they

(paradoxically) are both, as we saw in the section on Feminism and Definition, complicit with and combat against patriarchal structures. Even if postmodernism is seen as patriarchy in new clothes, it must be remembered that in order to effectively overcome patriarchy, as Grosz puts it, feminists must be (and cannot help but be) immersed within it.

It seems to me that, strategically, feminists must be cautious, in light of postmodernist concerns, about articulating totalizing or essentialist frameworks. Furthermore, it seems that feminism would be greatly aided by the postmodernist perspective on difference and multiplicity, as we saw in Elam's articulation of *ms. en abyme*<sup>89</sup>. Postmodernists, in turn, would be greatly helped by not ignoring (the politics of) sexual difference, its prevalence within modernist and contemporary discourse, and the negative effects of totalized patriarchal structures. As Owens suggests, "...I have chosen to negotiate the treacherous course between postmodernism and feminism...in order to introduce the issue of sexual difference into the modernism/postmodernism debate--a debate which has until now been scandalously in-different" (Owens, 59)<sup>90</sup>.

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<sup>89</sup> Or, as Flax suggests, "...many of the indeterminacies with feminist theories are necessary and productive. Premature closure and attempts to construct theories conceptualized as successors to and analogies of the "grand theories" of Western thought will impede the further development of feminist theorizing" (Flax, 142-143).

<sup>90</sup> Hekman also notes that "...a feminist perspective can contribute a needed gender sensitivity to postmodern thought" (Hekman, 189). With respect to postmodern indifference to sexual politics I think of Rorty's comment that pragmatism or postmodernism "...is neutral between feminism and masculinism" (Rorty, 101). Whether proclamations of "neutrality" necessarily implies "indifference" or not, is another debate. However, I would at least suggest that claims which purport to be "neutral" (about issues of masculinism and feminism) tend to favour the status quo rather than advocating for political changes.